A LOYAL HUGUENOT MAID

MARGARET S. COMRIE

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In the Salon.—*Page* 122

Frontispiece

A LOYAL HUGUENOT MAID

BY

MARGARET S. COMRIE

PHILADELPHIA
GEORGE W. JACOBS & CO
PUBLISHERS

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Published August, 1902.

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A LOYAL HUGUENOT MAID

CHAPTER I

THE PRESBYTÈRE OF PONEFRÀ

It was the month of April in the Val Martino. The year was 1686. At the open salon window of the old presbytère of Ponefrà stood a young girl. A shadow rested on her brow, and ever and again with a quick, furtive movement she drew her hand across her eyes.

A gentle touch on her shoulder made her start. "My darling! My precious little Azerole! And you had looked for it that this day should have been the brightest in all the year for you! Child, child! in the happy past how easy it was for your mother to make her little ones' birthdays gladsome, but to-day——"

There was a quiver in the low voice, and for a moment the speaker, Madame Montoux, the pastor's gentle wife, had a hard fight to maintain her own composure.

The girl turned swiftly and flung her arms round her mother's neck in an almost convulsive clasp, then, moved by a quick impulse, she freed herself, and drawing her slender figure to its full height, said, with a

proud effort to be calm, "Mother, I am seventeen years old to-day. I am 'little Azerole' no longer, but a woman grown. I have been telling myself that now it is time I should think of the happiness of others rather than of my own. If I were not so selfish I should not forget so often as I do that it will be even harder for my father and for you to leave the presbytère and our own dear valleys. As Léon says, exile is after all only exile, not worse; and in the new home we have to make for ourselves in the new country we shall have each other, and truly that is everything."

"Our own dear valleys," she had said. But in truth, to the Montoux family the valleys of Piedmont were theirs only by adoption. It was but sixteen years since François Montoux, at the earnest request of the Table in Torre Pelice, had quitted his native Dauphiné, to undertake the pastorate of a large district in the Val Martino. But to him and to his devoted wife these sixteen years had greatly endeared to them the land of their adoption, while to their children, who had known no other home, it was indeed the beloved fatherland.

"Oh, yes! to be all together, that is everything!" reiterated Azerole. "And yet—" she broke off with a sigh, and turning again to the window looked wistfully over the fair picture—in the foreground, the gay flower-beds bounded by a dazzling show of green in the terraced vineyards; beyond, the wooded heights at whose base nestled the village of Ponefrà, the roofs of the church, the school, and the tiny cabanes huddled close together as if for protection and warmth. So absorbed was the girl's gaze that she did not see the

look of motherly pride change to one of distress, even terror, on the face that watched her where she stood with the afternoon sunshine falling like a crown of glory upon her drooping head.

A critic would not have pronounced Azerole Montoux beautiful in the strict sense of the word. But she possessed that indescribable charm which is, after all, more attractive than the mere regularity of features, to which she certainly could not lay claim. Her piquant vivacity of manner, which she owed to her French birth and breeding, the grace of her figure and movements, the depth of expression in her dark eyes—above all, the look of intelligence, honesty, and steadfast purpose that marked every feature—had gained for her, even as a child, the title "Azerole la belle." But by the simple affectionate peasants of the Val Martino Azerole was loved for something more than her outward attractions. "Our mademoiselle is as good as she is beautiful," they were wont with fond pride to say.

The remark was uttered in Azerole's hearing one day by an old woman, more grateful than discreet. The girl flushed crimson, and shrank as from a blow. "Ah, Magna Isabelle!" she cried in much distress, "you would not say so if you truly knew me! You and the rest see but the best of me, the outside only. Vraiment, if you but knew me for what I am, you would see that I am not good within, not good in my heart, though I fain would be."

That was two years ago, but to-day, her seventeenth birthday, Azerole, although more womanly than girls of that age in our own times, would have made the

same humble, child-like confession, "I am not good within." And that look of fear on Madame Montoux's face deepened as she watched her child, for with torturing apprehension she was asking herself what the future might have in store for her passionate, self-willed, proud, yet withal generous Azerole. Nay, more—and the mother's heart shrank from the thought—would not the girl's very winsomeness but intensify the dangers that menaced her young life?

"A woman grown," she had said. Ay, a woman now, and so soon! With a woman's sorrows and a woman's dangers waiting for her on this the very threshold of her womanhood! Madame Montoux's fingers tightened upon each other in a clasp that was physical pain. Oh, if only she—at whatever cost to herself—could have snatched her children from the terrors that threatened them!

But Gabrielle Montoux was a brave woman. It counted for much that she, a scion of the noble house of the De Montélimarts, reckoned among her ancestors some of the bravest knights of France; but it counted for much more that she was the daughter of a Huguenot seigneur who had sacrificed his worldly all for the sake of the truth which he had taught his family to hold dearer than life itself. And now, although her cheek was pale at the thought of that dread future, there was no wavering of her firm trust in Him who was the God alike of the Huguenot and the Vaudois.

Azerole's slowly wandering gaze had been arrested at a quiet little spot hidden by a clump of trees close by the church. In imagination she was seeing a

simple headstone on which she could read the inscription, "Lucien, beloved son of Henri and Gabrielle Montoux, aged twelve years. God took him, March 20th, 1685."

Azerole drew a long breath. "Mother, mother," she sighed, as she pointed to the little churchyard, "how hard it is to go without him!"

"Thank God!" The words burst involuntarily from Madame Montoux. "Thank God for one, at least, of my lambs safely sheltered in the fold above!"

Startled, the girl moved nearer to her mother, who put her arm round her child and drew her closer still. "What have you heard, mother?" The question came in an awe-struck whisper. "Is there bad news? Are the other valleys in danger?"

"Ay, they are in danger, and—and we as they," was the low response.

"We? Oh no, no, not we!" cried the girl. "Impossible! The Val Martino has sent in its submission to the Duke. Nothing worse than exile can come to us."

The mother's enfolding arms tightened about the slight form she held. "My Azerole, I dare not keep the truth from you any longer. A rumour has reached us, it comes through our faithful Jules Bersour, that our submission to go into exile has been rejected upon the plea that it arrived too late. It is believed that our enemies willed that it should be so." Azerole did not speak, but she shivered as with sudden cold. "Chérie, the clouds are gathering black above our heads. But we must not lose our faith in our heavenly Father. If the clouds are dark, He is behind them, and He is light."

"Mother, you—you said there was danger. What is it?"

Madame Montoux drew a quick breath. "The worst. Jules Bersour hears that several regiments of dragoons, both French and Piedmontese, are to be ordered to attack the valleys, the Val Martino with the rest."

"When?" Azerole's lips framed the word, but no sound came.

"We do not know yet, but it—it may be—soon——"

At the word Azerole broke from her. "Soon!" she repeated wildly. "Soon! and we do nothing, nothing!"

In a frenzy of excitement she was rushing away with the terrified instinct which, in moments of danger, would seek for help somewhere, anywhere, but she was held back by her mother's detaining hand. "Courage, my Azerole. Be calm, my child, else you will unfit yourself to be the comfort to me which you have always been." The words quieted her like a spell. Leaning against a chair, for her limbs were trembling under her, she listened while Madame Montoux went on in a lowered voice. "There is naught, or, at least, there is but little, that can be done until your father's return from Angrogna. If the news he brings confirms Jules' report then he will summon a conference to consult what had best be done, whether to send another deputation to the Duke at Turin or to prepare for immediate flight. But—" the pastor's wife glanced anxiously from the window—"but your father is long in returning. I fear it bodes no good."

"Mother, is there not something, anything, I could do?"

With a quick start of recollection came the hurried answer, "Yes, child. Find Léon. He went off this morning at daybreak. Jeanne says he meant to be back to breakfast, but he has not come yet. The danger, it is true, is not so imminent that I should be anxious on his account" (Alas! poor mother!) "and yet—I know not wherefore—I wish that he were here. Jules Bersour might know where he is gone. But Jules, you know, has to be very guarded just now. He is distrusted by our people because he is a stranger and a Papist, and he is suspected by the Piedmontese of being too friendly to us. I dare not send a message to him by any one but you. Hasten to Jules. He will find Léon for us."

There was no need to urge Azerole to hasten. This new anxiety lent wings to her feet, and called to the front all her womanly instincts and energy. As she caught up her bonnet there came the sound of tripping feet running up the garden path, and the next minute a rosy-cheeked sprite of five years old bounded through the low French window.

"Ah, here you are, Azerole la belle! I may call you that to-day since it is your birthday, may I not? Are you going down to the village? Then you will take me with you? You know," coaxingly added the tiny maiden as she read hesitation on her sister's strangely grave face, "you know good, kind Jules is making a cradle for my dolly, so of course he will like me to come and see how it is growing."

"Take her with you," whispered the mother. "It will explain your going to Jules' cabane. Besides,

Jeanne and I have things to prepare in case of need, and the petite is better away."

Quick-witted Stella saw she had gained her point, and danced off with a merry laugh. Azerole followed, but at the gate she turned. In the doorway of the picturesque old presbytère stood her mother—a tall, graceful figure, her sweet refined face still young and fair despite the silver threads that mingled with the dark hair so smoothly braided under the matron's snowy coif. Azerole sprang back, and was once more folded in her mother's arms. "My Azerole! My precious one!" And to the girl's terrified dismay Madame Montoux broke down in a fit of passionate weeping. But the caressing touch of her child's hands, the sound of her loving voice, recalled the pastor's wife to herself. The momentary anguish passed, and her voice, though low, was steady as before. "My Azerole, I leave you in God's hands. Whatever happens He will take care of you. You remember your father's sermon last Lord's Day upon the text, 'Now we see through a glass darkly,' or rather, for so he explained the translation has it—'Now we see through a riddle.' Daughter, little daughter, what and if our lives are but a riddle to us 'now'? By-and-by, in the coming 'then,' we shall understand the riddle. Meanwhile we can wait and trust, for it is our Father God who holds the key. Let us take courage, chérie, you and I. God loves us with a deeper love than that with which we love each other. Do you believe that, my child?" There was no answer. With a little sigh the mother gently raised the drooping head. "The shadows are growing long, dear, you must go."

But the clasp of the clinging arms about her neck tightened. "Mother mine, there is something I have to tell you. I think I was shy of saying it heretofore, lest I should say more than I meant. But something tells me I must speak now. Mother, I was wont to believe that I could never, no never, love the good God as much as I loved you and my father. But of late, since He took our Lucien home, He has been teaching me, ah, so tenderly! to love Him the best. And I think, yes, I am sure that it is even so with Léon too."

This time the tears that rained down the mother's face were tears of joy. "Ah, how good, how good beyond all our poor words of thanks, is our God!" she cried brokenly. "My Azerole, you have comforted me indeed! And now, come what may, nothing can take this from me, the joy of knowing that my precious ones are safe!"

And while Azerole hurried to overtake little Stella, already far down the mountain-side, one sentence kept repeating itself in her ears: "My Azerole, you have comforted me indeed!"

Almost hidden by a thicket of trees at the bottom of the hill stood a half-ruined hut. At the sound of Stella's ringing voice calling "Jules! Jules! good Monsieur Jules!" there emerged from the doorway, under which his tall figure was forced to stoop, a great broad-shouldered fellow of six feet three. No need to ask the calling of this somewhat grim-looking giant—his military bearing, the scar across his cheek, his high riding-boots proclaimed him in very truth the soldier. By the majority of the Vaudois of Ponefrà Trooper

Bersour was looked at askance. He was a Papist and a Frenchman. Worse still, he had once served—nay, for aught they knew, he might serve again—under the flag of their foes. Indeed, but for the fact that he was known and trusted by monsieur the pastor, the peasants would have returned Jules' overtures of friendliness with a scantness of ceremony which would have given him to understand that his visit to the Val Martino was unwelcome.

Shading his eyes with his hand from the rays of the setting sun that glinted through the trees, the trooper scanned the paths through the wood, a frown of anxiety on his rugged features. In truth it was not monsieur the pastor's daughters he had expected to see at that moment, and it was with a preoccupied air that he respectfully returned their greeting. With her inquiry after Léon on her lips Azerole waited a moment, for Jules with raised hand stood in an attitude of listening. The next instant a youth, heated and panting, sprang out of the thicket behind the cabane and hurried up to Jules, who drew him quickly aside.

But a brief word was exchanged between the trooper and the lad, who once more sped away, this time in the direction of the hamlet. Bersour returned hurriedly to the waiting girls, and at sight of his face Azerole was startled, for his features were working with some uncontrollable emotion under which his strong frame visibly trembled. "Mdlle. Azerole," he whispered hoarsely, drawing her out of the hearing of little Stella, who was looking eagerly about for the cradle she had come to see—"Mdlle. Azerole, there is not an hour, not

a moment to be lost. These devils," his clenched hand fiercely struck the air, "these cursed dragoons are at Rioclaret. Next—when their work there is done—they will be at Ponefrà. Fly to the presbytère. Tell madame your mother that Jules Bersour says it. Tell her to escape at once to the Grotte on the Col Roderet. Pierre Revel is off to rouse the hamlet. I will away to watch for monsieur your father."

With blanched face the girl staggered against the wall of the hut. Jules caught her in his great arms. "Mademoiselle!" he cried, shaking her almost roughly, "this is no time for weakness. You must needs be strong. Think of madame your mother, and Mdlle. Stella, and——"

"Léon," she gasped. "We do not know where he is."

The trooper uttered an exclamation of dismay. "Has he not come back? He went this morning to the Alp to see after a sick shepherd, one Lantaret, there. I do not know the place, but I daresay I could find——"

"I know it! I know it!" she cried, the news of Léon bringing a tinge of colour to her cheeks. "It is some way beyond the caves on the other side of the Col Roderet. I will find him. Jules, take Stella to my mother. See you to them, and to my father——"

Even while she spoke, and without letting herself so much as glance at her little sister, she turned and sped swiftly away, making for the mountains in the opposite direction from the presbytère.

One moment Jules stood motionless; the next, as a sudden thought struck him, he strode after her. "Mademoiselle," he said very low, "for your life,

mademoiselle, let neither of you return to Ponefrà. We shall meet at the caves on the Col."

She looked at him. "When—when will they——?"

He understood. "Curse the fiends!" he muttered through his set teeth. "They may be here to—" he stopped: the sight of the white terrified face beside him drove back the word on his lips—"to-morrow," he muttered, and without looking at her strode back to the hut.

And she, like a chamois that is in mortal fear, sprang up the hill-path, bounding over rocks and crags with a lightness of foot that terror had winged. "To-morrow," he had said—"perhaps to-morrow." The words rang in her ears.

But was "to-morrow" the word that echoed in the heart of Jules Bersour as he dashed up the hill to the presbytère carrying little Stella in his arms? Or—merciful God!—was it "to-night?"

Ay, "to-night"—that fatal night hovering so near on its shadowy wings—pressing onwards with relentless footsteps in the gathering darkness—truly of it might it well be said "and it was night." To the peaceful village homes in the Val Martino it brought the clash of arms, the groans of the wounded and the dying, the wails of infants, the imprecations, ay, the laughter of the murderers, the blaze of burning homesteads, and—a great silence.

CHAPTER II

CASTEL BRIANZA

SITUATED some distance north-west of Saluzzo, in the plain of Piedmont, stood Castel Brianza, a mediæval structure erected in the days when Italian country homes had need to be strongholds. Seen from a little distance, the old castle with its massive walls and battlements had a grim, almost forbidding aspect. But, on entering the great paved court round which the building formed three sides of a square, one's preconceived notions of gloominess were at once dispelled. The brilliant green of the orange and lemon trees, the pleasant splash of the fountain, the soft cooing of the doves, as they flitted overhead or alighted on the flags to dip their bills in the crystal water of the basin, the glimpses obtained through open doors and windows of corridors and rooms furnished comfortably, even luxuriously, for the times, all this united in producing an agreeable impression upon the visitor.

The great gates at the farther end of the court opened into an avenue of noble chestnut trees, and beyond the avenue lay the public highway leading from Lucerna on the west to Turin far away to the north-east.

On this road, slowly toiling along in the dust and

heat of a sultry afternoon in May, about three weeks after the day on which our story opened, there walked a little party of three. Somewhat in advance of his two companions strode a hugely tall man, whom we recognise as our acquaintance Jules Bersour. His face wore a look of anxiety; and, as he marched resolutely on, his gaze turned again and again to the towers of Castel Brianza, now near at hand. "It is a risk," he muttered to himself, pulling fiercely at his heavy moustache. "It is a risk. All will depend upon the mood in which we find our proud Madame. Eh bien! at least I have one weapon which I think I can use to good purpose in a tilt with her. For the rest, any other plan I can think of has still greater risk."

For the moment the trooper had almost forgotten the pair lagging far behind him. The one, a pale, weary, sad-faced girl, is hardly recognisable as "Azerole la belle," the blooming maiden of the Val Martino. Three long weeks of physical and mental suffering had done their work with such cruel effect that the girl, as she moved languidly along the sun-baked road, looked years older than her seventeen summers. The lad on whose arm she leant resembled her so strongly as to put beyond a doubt the question of their relationship as brother and sister. The two were alike, yet different. Léon's more regular features had nothing of the piquant delicacy and changefulness of expression which characterised his sister's, and his dark eyes, though fine as hers, lacked the brilliant fire, alternating with witching softness, which were Azerole's subtle charm. But his open, honest face was one that invited

trust as frankly as did hers, while the strength of purpose so characteristic of the girl was in the youth united with a courageous fearlessness which would have done credit to his knightly ancestors.

The sound of galloping hoofs roused Jules from his reverie. "Comment!" he muttered, "whom have we here, I wonder? Ho there, you lazy laggards! Walk a little faster if you can, or indeed whether you can or not!" he shouted roughly to the pair behind, who obediently quickened their pace.

"M. Broussel! It is then you!" cried Bersour in a tone of unmistakable relief, as the horseman at sight of the party drew rein.

"Ma foi! if it be not Giant Goliath himself as large as life and larger!" laughed the rider, a burly, jovial-looking man, belonging apparently to the well-to-do landowner class. "But, my good Jules, this is a new rôle you are playing," and M. Broussel glanced with a puzzled expression towards the two young Vaudois, who had come to a halt on observing Bersour to be in conversation with the stranger. "Now, in the name of all the saints, what brings you here, trooper, in such company? You have got a prize yonder," this in an undertone, as he darted a keen look towards Azerole. "I hardly thought, however, that hunting barbets was in your line."

Jules knew the man he had to deal with. "I preferred to pick them up before the next prize-hunter came along," he returned significantly.

The farmer struck his heels into the sides of his horse with an energy that made the fiery animal rear.

"You know, Jules Bersour, that this fiendish harrying of the heretics is not to my mind, but you know as well as I that in this matter the Church commands that we shall have no mind but hers. Ma foi! man, what brings you here with these Vaudois?"

Bersour pointed to the towers of Castel Brianza showing through the trees. "I am going to ask Madame to shelter the demoiselle," he said shortly.

M. Broussel stared. "Trooper Jules, I never before took you for a fool; but if this be not the most foolhardy enterprise of yours, my name is not Hyppolyte Broussel of Malanot."

Bersour shrugged his shoulders. "We shall see," was his laconic reply.

The other looked at him curiously. "What on earth is *your* interest in the poor devils?"

Jules' eyes kindled. "I owe my life to the generosity of monsieur their father, years agone in France. But for M. Montoux I should have been shot for a dog of a traitor by my captain, whose private game of murder, plunder, and worse I had dared to thwart. Monsieur the pastor, at great risk to himself, exposed the scélérat of a captain, and Jules Bersour was saved." He paused a moment, then added quietly, glancing over his shoulder towards the brother and sister, "These, M. Broussel, are his children." The farmer nodded, comprehending. Jules' eyes had wandered again to the grey towers of Castel Brianza. "Madame," he said, his tone one of quiet assurance—"Madame will listen to me. She will agree."

But at this M. Broussel's good-natured mouth

widened in a smile of utter incredulity. "You are an honest-hearted fellow, Jules Bersour, but a madman. Certes, you do not know Madame of Brianza, that is clear." A peculiar look passed over the other's features which the farmer did not observe. "Eh bien! may the saints—if it be not beyond them—prosper you. But, if indeed your fool's errand should succeed, and Hyppolyte Broussel find himself the fool"—again he laughed boisterously—"then I promise you he will pay the penalty by taking the lad to Malanot to be near his sister at Brianza. Ha, ha! Adieu, my crazy friend. No, by my faith, it shall be *au revoir*. I shall presently make my way round by Castel Brianza in time to witness the overthrow of Goliath's rash boast."

Jules looked after him. "At least, M. Broussel, you shall not find the giant prostrate on his face before the lady of Brianza," he muttered, then turning on his heel strode up to his charge. "M. Léon, mademoiselle your sister is tired. In yonder shady thicket she could rest for a little."

The two turned aside to the sheltered nook he had pointed out; but Bersour, going a little way off, seated himself moodily on a bank where he had a good view up and down the highroad. For a few minutes the brother and sister sat in silence, Azerole wearily resting her head against Léon, whose strong young arm was thrown protectingly round her.

"Léon," she said, breaking the quiet at last, "has Jules' manner not struck you strangely these last days? I do not mean his rough way of speaking

to us when he thinks himself overheard. That we understand. But I have fancied that he seemed to shun being alone with us of late. The thought has come to me that he dreads our asking questions." Léon, always a silent lad and less quick than Azerole in jumping to conclusions, made no reply. "Where is he taking us to now, I wonder?" the girl went on, her weary, listless tone changing to one of sharp anxiety. "Did not you see him point to the castle in yonder wood when he was talking to the gentleman on horseback a minute ago? Can it be that we are going there? And for what? Oh, Léon, Léon! I thought my heart was dead, that nothing more could make me afraid or sad; but I was wrong, for now the fear that you and I may be parted is more than I can bear." And Azerole, who had not shed a tear for days, covered her face with her hands and broke into a passion of sobs.

Léon did his best to comfort and reassure her, but his own heart was heavy. This new terror, the fear of separation, which had suddenly come to Azerole, rousing her at last from her almost apathetic listlessness, had for long haunted him like a waking dream. Too utterly spent for much weeping, too anxious to be anything but restless, Azerole presently spoke again. This time her voice was a moan of pain. "Oh, if we but knew that our dear ones were safe! that Jules speaks truth, and not, as I sometimes fancy, but kind untruths to save us from despair! When I was ill in the cave at the Col—so ill that you, Léon, could not leave me—Jules was rarely with us. Where did he go for long days together? And when he came, though ever

good and kind, he was so silent, so *distrait*, as if some burden weighed him down."

"Nay then, chérie, can you wonder?" soothingly returned Léon. "Catholic though he be, Jules Bersour's big heart cried out daily, hourly, in bitter indignation against the horrors of these dark days of massacre and terror. Little marvel if they have preyed upon his kindly soul."

Dissatisfied, Azerole shook her head. At that moment, however, Bersour, calling that it was time to go on, rose to his feet once more to lead the way; but Azerole, with a touch of her old imperiousness, signed to him to wait.

"Jules, there is something we wish to ask you, Léon and I." Avoiding her glance the trooper reluctantly obeyed her behest. "Jules, are you taking us to yonder house we see in the chestnut woods?"

His brow cleared. This was not the question he had dreaded most to hear. "Mademoiselle, I know the—I mean I know somewhat of the mistress of Castel Brianza. If she would take you in you would have a comfortable home, and I, perchance, could come from time to time to see how it fared with you."

"And Léon?"

Only too well Bersour understood the quick-caught breath that broke off the short question, and the very effort he made to conceal his secret distress caused his voice to sound curt. "One at a time, mademoiselle. The saints prosper us on our errand so far as you are concerned. Further than that the saints themselves may know, but, certes, I do not."

Azerole's head, which had been bent eagerly forward, sank again on Léon's shoulder. The lad, usually slowest to speak when most deeply stirred, broke in now with a thought that moved him so profoundly that for the time being it drove all else into the background. "Bersour, when you speak as you did just now of the saints, you force us to remember that you are not one of us, Vaudois. Other times I could forget it. But Azerole and I in our hearts believe that you are no true Catholic. Ah, Jules! why call yourself one thing and live another?"

The giant moved uneasily. Looking cautiously about him, he replied in a lowered voice: "M. Léon, mayhap I can help you and mademoiselle best as I am. For the rest"—there was an ominous flash in his fierce eyes—"for the rest, these demons that call themselves the faithful sons of 'Mother' Church have done their best to drive me from the faith of the mother I loved, the mother that loved me. But see, Mademoiselle Azerole, the afternoon is far on; we must proceed."

But she had something more to ask. Again her hand was raised to control his eager movement to break away. "Jules"—there was a red spot burning now on her white cheek, and the fingers of the hand resting on Léon's arm tightened their hold—"Jules, tell us the truth—the truth as before God in heaven—where are our father, our mother, and our little Stella?"

The trooper fondly imagined he had prepared himself for this question, yet now it had come he hesitated, sorely troubled. Then it struck him that perhaps the truth, as before God in heaven, was after all the best

way out of the difficulty. "Mademoiselle, perchance I was not altogether straightforward when I told you and Monsieur Léon that, along with a little band who had escaped and fled over the mountains to Switzerland, were monsieur the pastor, madame, and the petite. You were ill and weak, mademoiselle, and for your sake I let my hope hurry on my tongue too fast, voilà tout. But when I tell you all, vraiment, I know that you too will have hope. It is true that on that night at Ponefrà, with the petite in my left arm, I with my right hewed a way through those fiends for monsieur the pastor and madame. I saw them, as I believed, making for the path through the wood leading to the Col. When—when all was over and I had climbed to the alp, and had assured myself that you, mademoiselle, and Monsieur Léon were safe in the cave, I returned to the village. Monsieur Léon, you know it, for I told you that they were not among — among——" He stopped, for the girl's pale face had grown a shade paler, and she shivered.

Léon pressed her closer. "Yes, yes," he said huskily, "it is certain that they were not among those—those left behind at Ponefrà." He spoke reassuringly, but his colour, too, had changed.

"I have made strict search in all the jails," went on Bersour. "I have learnt the names of all the Vaudois prisoners, and the name of monsieur your father is not among them. Eh bien! am I not justified in saying that, without doubt, they are among those who have escaped?" He paused, glancing significantly at Léon. The lad understood, and at once responded in the

cheery tone of one who is himself more than half convinced.

"Courage, chérie! I think Jules must be right. Long ere now our dear ones must have safely arrived with the rest in Switzerland."

It was with a sense of relief that honest-hearted Jules saw the girl's face had caught something of the glow of hope that shone on her brother's. "Now, by my faith," he muttered, as he strode once more along the highroad, "is it not a miracle that they have never so much as taken thought that monsieur their father is no Vaudois, and that the galleys at Marseilles are more like to be his fate! There will be Jules Bersour's next quest, if only these poor souls were safely housed." Involuntarily he quickened his steps, in obedience to his instructions the other two falling behind. Azerole longed to ask him something of Castel Brianza and its owner, but there was that about Bersour which seemed to forbid any further questioning, and the remainder of the way—it was not far—was taken in silence.

On through the grand old chestnut avenue into which he presently turned went the trooper, and right into the castle court, the great iron gate of which stood open. Here he paused, apparently uncertain what next to do. Finally he crossed the court, followed by the young Vaudois, and pushing aside the silk curtain which had been lowered to shade the entrance-hall from the glare of the afternoon sun, he glanced within. The hall, a spacious and luxurious apartment, adorned with fine statues, old armour, and trophies of the chase, was sweet with the scent of flowering plants, and seemed on

this stiflingly hot day a paradise of perfumed coolness. At either end a huge fireplace, piled up with logs of wood, told of ample provision for winter comfort.

At this moment the only occupant of the hall was a child, a fair pretty boy about six years old, who lay on an invalid couch at the farther corner. "The little hunchback, without doubt," muttered the trooper to himself, at the same time taking off his military cap; and signing to his companions to remain upon the threshold, he stepped towards the child's couch.

Opening his blue eyes, which had been half closed, the boy, startled at the sight of the stranger giant, cried out in a weak, querulous voice, "What a high man you are! and how heavy! Your big boots are causing the floor to earthquake. Go away!"

Bersour smiled, and on the instant the sternness in his set face melted away. Bowing, he said in the coaxing fashion he had with children, "Signorino, I am sorry to have frightened you, and I will carry my big stupid feet away so soon as I have seen Madame your— I mean Madame de Rohan. Is she within, Signorino?"

"My name is not Signorino. I am Monsieur Christophe de Beaurégard. And perhaps you need not go away immediately. When you stand still the floor stands too." Then, raising his little voice, he called sharply, "Madame Héloise!"

Instantly a door on the opposite side of the hall opened, and there entered the mistress of the château, a tall, queenly-looking woman dressed in black. She was still in the prime of life, but already her hair was silvered, and the head-dress of soft lace she wore made

her seem older than her forty years. Her pale, clearly-cut features reminded one of the perfect chiselling of a Greek statue, but there the resemblance ceased, for certainly the fire that burned in the brilliant, deep-set eyes, with their strange look of unrest, had nothing to do with dead marble. By her acquaintances in the neighbourhood, sometimes even by those who called themselves her friends, Madame de Rohan of Castel Brianza was known as a haughty aristocrat, cold and proud to the last degree, and unpardonably reserved. And, while it was no less true that from her servants and dependants she won both respect and devotion, it must be confessed that in many cases affection was tempered with a reverence that bordered on fear.

On entering the hall, shadowed by the curtain which Jules had drawn partially back, Madame did not at first see her visitor, who stood with his back to the light. She was moving swiftly towards the couch, but the boy, waving her aside, pointed to the stranger. The trooper wheeled sharply round, and the two stood face to face. Jules bowed low. Mechanically, as it seemed, the lady made a slight inclination of her head. But her face had changed, a sudden rush of crimson colour had come and gone, leaving her even paler than before, and into her eyes there had crept a look which had not been there at the first. Was it fear?

CHAPTER III

A BARGAIN

BEFORE a word had been spoken in the hall there came the sound of a horse's hoofs cantering up the avenue; the loud voice of M. Broussel was heard calling for some one to hold his spirited mare; and the next instant the substantial figure of the master of Malanot appeared in the hall.

"Good afternoon, Madame. Blaise told me I should find you within. I called to pay my humble respects, and to congratulate you upon the fine promise of your vineyards since the rain; but I misdoubt me I am come at the wrong time. I see you are engaged upon business with this good fellow, whom I used to know in days gone by," and he nodded half mischievously towards Jules.

In no way embarrassed, the trooper bowed, but it was at Madame de Rohan he looked while he replied to the farmer. "Seeing that you are already aware, monsieur, of the nature of the little affair which brings me to see Madame, your presence is no intrusion so far as I am concerned. But, if Madame would condescend to withdraw a space while we talk together?" he stopped, bowing low as before.

She understood, and silently led the way to the room

she had just left, a pretty boudoir furnished in the French rather than in the Italian fashion. There were good pictures on the walls, articles of beauty and *vertu* scattered about in lavish profusion, the whole quite in keeping with the pleasant litter of books, work, and writing materials peculiar to a lady's private sanctum.

Left alone, the boy Christophe turned his attention to the two young strangers who were waiting just beyond the curtain of the entrance-hall? Who were they? Was the giant their father? What were they talking about so earnestly while they stood there hand in hand? Presently the murmur of voices from the room beyond made him turn his head. The trooper, his tall form stiffly erect by the door, which he had inadvertently left ajar, was speaking. Madame Héloise, seated in her low easy-chair by the window, seemed to be listening with cold indifference to what he was saying, while M. Broussel, leaning against the high marble mantel-shelf, looked on with a face of such amazed bewilderment that Christophe, watching curiously from his distant corner, laughed softly to himself. The worthy farmer, looking now at Madame's still figure, now at the trooper's stern, set face, was wondering whether he, Hyppolyte of Malanot, were awake or dreaming. "This stranger!" he soliloquised, then paused, glancing from one to the other with a puzzled stare, "certes, but are they after all strangers, these two? This stranger, this common soldier of France, ma foi! but his speech is that of a commander rather than a petitioner!"

"To speak correctly, Madame," Jules was saying,

"Mademoiselle Azerole Montoux and Monsieur her brother are no Vaudois. Their parents are French Huguenots from Dauphiné. Their grandfather on the mother's side was the old Baron Sigismond de Montélimart."

A tremor passed over the still figure by the window. Grasping with both hands the arms of her chair she tried to rise, then sank helplessly back, her features rigid, and in her eyes again that same look—there was no mistaking it now—of fear.

But the trooper, appearing to notice nothing unusual, went on with slow deliberateness: "Madame has already an adopted son, n'est-ce-pas? therefore, methinks, an adopted daughter might perchance not come so far amiss."

There was no response from Madame Héloise. Hardly crediting his ears on hearing what he called the fellow's impudent familiarity, M. Broussel was for the moment so blinded with indignation that he did not notice Madame de Rohan had fallen back in her chair overcome by a sudden faintness. Seizing his riding-whip the farmer turned threateningly upon Jules. At the risk of his own life Hyppolyte of Malanot would fight this giant. His insolence to their lady of Brianza was insufferable. But with a quick gesture Bersour motioned him aside, and striding to the buffet, on which there stood a bottle of wine, he poured some into a tumbler. "It is the heat that has upset Madame," he said shortly, while he held the glass to her lips, his huge figure interposing between her and her champion's half-wrathful, half-curious eyes.

"Yes, yes, it is the heat, only the heat," she murmured, after swallowing a mouthful or two of the wine. But it was not the claret that had brought the colour back to her cheeks and loosened the convulsive tightening of her fingers on the chair. A look had passed between her and this stranger soldier, and that swift glance had told Héloise of Brianza she had nothing to fear.

It was at this point that Christophe, greatly wondering at the strange movements of the trio in the boudoir, half-raised himself the better to see what was going on. One of his cushions slipped down to the floor, and, in trying to reach it, the child almost overbalanced himself. His startled little cry was not heard by the two men in the inner room, but Madame with an effort rose and crossed the apartment as fast as her trembling limbs would allow her. She was forestalled, however. The sound of distress had reached Azerole's ears, and she, always quick when help was needed, had sprung to the little fellow's side. Replacing the pillow which had fallen, she gently raised the child's tiny form, and laid him tenderly down, so tenderly indeed that his poor aching back felt no jar.

"How do you know the way so well, mademoiselle?" he asked wonderingly.

"I had a little brother who was once sick like you. I used to make his pillows soft for him when he was weary."

"Where is the brother now?" asked the child, some instinct telling him that the tall lad leaning against the hall door could not be the brother she meant.

The girl's sad, brown eyes were blinded by a sudden

rush of tears. "Lucien is at home with God to-day," she answered very low.

For a moment or two the little fellow remained silent. Then, slipping a thin, hot hand into hers, he said in a voice curiously unlike the peevish discontent of his usual tone, "I am only poor lame Christophe, only that, but would I do instead of little Lucien?"

There was no resisting the wistful pleading of his tone. Bending down she kissed his forehead. "Chéri," she whispered softly, and on the instant two clinging arms were round her neck. When she raised her head Madame de Rohan was standing beside her. Their eyes met, and the girl, struck by something she could not have defined, involuntarily recoiled a step. For half a minute, fascinated by Madame's gaze, and curiously uncertain whether it attracted or repelled her, she stood motionless, then without word or sign sprang back to Léon's side.

"Comment, chérie! what is it?" he asked.

"I do not know," she whispered, shrinking nearer to him, "it is her eyes; they frighten me."

But the look which had had such a strangely disturbing effect on the young Vaudoise had gone when Madame de Rohan turned to speak to Jules Bersour. "I will take the girl. She may prove useful with—with Monsieur Christophe de Beaurégard. The boy grows more troublesome and unmanageable every day. The servants can do nothing with him. Every one said it was high time he were learning something, so I sent for Brother Thomas from the monastery. But in a week he had to give it up. He could not teach him a single

letter. You say the girl has had a good education. Eh bien, she can try what she can do."

Jules Bersour's big heart gave a mighty throb of thankfulness, but he kept his feelings well under control. He had listened in respectful silence to Madame's short hurried sentences, and now he merely said, "I know Mdlle. Montoux, and I believe, Madame, that you will have no reason ever to repent of your kindness." Then with the cool alertness of a business man he turned to M. Broussel. "And now, monsieur, I claim your promise. You will remember it?"

The farmer's jaw dropped. "Goliath, you tremendous fellow!" he burst forth. "But this is going too far. There is my wife now—a *dévote* of Holy Mother Church—I know not what size of a passion she would be in were I to bring a heretic, caught red-handed one might say, to corrupt the saints at Malanot."

"Certes, I admit that the tempestuous fury of Madame Broussel's temper, and the suffering it causes you, monsieur, were difficulties that had not struck me."

The farmer coughed down his embarrassment at this feeling allusion to the character of his gentle partner, "Justine of the tender heart." "But," went on Jules, a sudden inspiration coming to him, "the thought had made its way, I know not how, into this foolish head of mine that monsieur might find himself the better of a clever lad who could take upon him the burden of writing and casting up of accounts that weigh so heavily upon a man when he comes to our time of life. M. Léon is clever beyond the ordinary, and highly educated. Certes! the heads these two young things carry on

their shoulders are not so empty, I can tell you, as most of ours that are older."

And now it was the master of Malanot's turn to astonish his hearers. "Look here, Goliath. I am in sore need of just such a capable fellow to manage my affairs and keep me from being unreasonably fleeced in my old age. I am no hand at figures, but it has at times struck me that subtraction seems to outrun addition in my coffers. That lazy lout Michel is no more use than a walking-stick—less, in fact, for I *could* use one to good purpose were I to lay it about his ears. Half his time he spends at the taverns, the other half in bed, and if there be the least little bit of knowledge in his foolish head it is the knowing how to keep that little to himself. But there — what am I saying? Michel is my poor Justine's beloved nephew. *She* says he has goodness, albeit invisible to the naked eye, that he has a soft heart (it is her own she feels, not his, the stone!), that he is delicate, and so on, and she would fly in a towering passion, I tell you, at the very idea of my ousting Michel and giving his place to a Vaudois heretic. And yet—" the speaker broke off and turned a longing glance towards the open-faced, intelligent-looking lad standing at the entrance hall, "she knows the place will go to rack and ruin, and they tell me, and I verily believe it, that these heretics neither cheat nor lie, that they are worth their wages ten times over, that they never drink nor play, that—but there, what am I drivelling on about? Did I not tell you, Jules Bersour, that madame my wife would be in a passion?"

"Cela va sans dire," imperturbably rejoined the

trooper. "Every one knows the hard heart of Madame Justine, more especially towards the orphans and the destitute; and, as I have said, we all pity the miserable life her husband leads through her ferocious temper. Cela va sans dire."

"Ma foi! but for length and breadth of impudence truly thou art a giant, Jules Bersour!"

There was encouragement in the farmer's hearty laugh, and Jules, without leave asked or given, beckoned his charge to approach.

Instinctively conscious that they were under discussion, the young Vaudois came forward with not a little inward perturbation. Outwardly, however, they were perfectly self-possessed. Their manners showed an ease and a refinement hardly to be looked for in the children of a simple Waldensian pastor; and when Azerole, led up to Madame by Léon, made her salutation with the quiet grace which was natural to her, Jules Bersour proudly told himself there was no fear that the pastor's children would bring discredit on the noble name he had claimed for them.

"Look here, boy," began M. Broussel in a tone of affected sternness, "look you here, boy. You and your sister are homeless, it seems. Now this lady, Madame of Brianza, is willing to take your sister to be governess to the little Monsieur Christophe; but as for you——"

"Madame is very good," gratefully interposed Léon, bowing to Madame; but Azerole, although she mechanically inclined her head, could utter no word; her anxiety for her brother was too great at the moment for speech.

"It so happens," continued the farmer, "that I am in need of a—a—of some one to help me to look after my farm accounts and the like. Bersour here declares you are a good scholar, and——"

Again Léon interrupted. With kindling eyes he took a step nearer M. Broussel. "Try me, monsieur," he pleaded, "only try me. I will do my best to serve you, indeed I will."

As M. Broussel looked into the open face of the lad and read uprightness in every line, his prejudices one by one melted away. Involuntarily he put out his hand in token of goodwill; then a thought struck him and he drew it back. "Allons, allons, we go too fast. See here, my fine fellow. If I take upon myself the odium and the risk of receiving into my house a heretic barbet, I must have some guarantee that I shall not some fine day find myself fooled for my pains. I will give you, Léon Montoux, a post at Malanot as clerk, secretary, or what you please to call it. And in a year's time you shall receive, if so be that you prove worthy, a small salary upon condition that you bind yourself down for an apprenticeship of five years. In the event of your breaking the said apprenticeship I shall demand as forfeit payment of two hundred golden crowns from you, and failing you, from your surety, Jules Bersour."

Five years!—Leon stood stunned. At eighteen, a five years' sentence of exile and servitude seems a lifetime. Azerole and he exchanged looks of blank dismay. Right well each knew the other's thought. Had they not planned that, so soon as they could obtain

news of their dear ones, they would without a moment's delay hasten to rejoin them? In silent but very evident distress they drew closer, and three shrewd observers read their faces like an open book.

M. Broussel turned on his heel with a short laugh. He did not know it, but there was an unmistakable ring of disappointment in the laugh. The trooper, troubled by the turn affairs had taken, rubbed the cuff of one sleeve upon the other, and pondered the situation with frowning brows. Apparently, the subject had but little interest for Madame de Rohan. She lay back in her easy-chair in an attitude of apathetic indifference, and only a keen observer would have noticed the covert watchfulness of her eyes, those eyes that burned now with a feverish brilliancy.

It was her voice that broke the silence. "Mon ami," she said, turning carelessly to M. Broussel, but speaking in a clear, slightly raised tone, "what news is this that I heard but yesternight of the Lucernette fraternity having ordered a rigorous search to be made for fugitive Vaudois? The Church, they say, is willing, nay, even anxious, to provide in the convents an asylum for youths and maidens from the valleys."

Azerole started. The remembrance of a dark hint Jules had once let fall rushed over her like a wave of terror, carrying away every other consideration before it. "Léon," she whispered, seizing hold of his arm with a grip that was almost pain, "Léon, better to serve for five years here, near each other, you and I, than—than—the convent and separation perhaps for ever. Léon, Léon, you could not leave me! I

have got none but you, and ah! you promised, brother mine, you promised to be your little Azerole's protector!"

Promised? Ay, and as her protector had he not pledged himself to take her back to their parents with God's help? "With God's help"—the words seemed to calm the wild tumult of his soul. Crushing down the fierce rebellion that had risen up within him threatening to warp his judgment, he rapidly considered the situation. If this hindrance to their plans was of God's sending, then the seeming hindrance must needs be but God's way of helping them. But—Léon winced—five long years, with the mocking alternative of two hundred golden crowns! The boy drew a deep breath. And yet—full well he knew it, for Jules and he had talked the matter over—without money, without physical strength on Azerole's part, without other escort than Bersour's to protect them from the barbet-hunters, the long and perilous journey to Switzerland was, in the meantime, out of the question. A moment or two longer Léon stood in deep thought. Outside in the court M. Broussel's mare was growing restive. The farmer had taken up his whip and hat, and was preparing to take his leave of Madame.

"Leon," whispered Azerole, "we asked God to guide us. Is this His hand, though we cannot see it in the dark?"

Slowly the young Vaudois raised his bowed head, and throwing his arm round his sister, who was trembling partly from nervous excitement, partly from

physical weakness, he turned to the waiting group. "Madame and Monsieur," he said respectfully, "in your homes would my sister and I be commanded to change our faith?"

Madame de Rohan started. "In Castel Brianza—" she said with sudden fierceness, "in Castel Brianza—*never!*" then broke off, and in her voice there was the sound of a sob.

"'Commanded to change your faith.' Ma foi, young man, but what kind of a fool do you take me for? Does not all the plain of Piedmont know that it would be a vast deal easier to make a crocodile change his skin than to compel a heretic Vaudois to change his faith? The saints be thanked that at Malanot we have not yet set up the Holy Inquisition. Until then, I tell you that at Malanot a crocodile may live a crocodile *provided he keeps his mouth shut.*"

"Then, monsieur, if so be that you are kind enough to have me, I pledge myself not to leave your service under five years, save with your permission, or upon the payment of two hundred crowns."

The farmer looked at the speaker for a moment in silence. Hyppolyte Broussel was credited with being a dull-witted man in certain branches of learning, but in the present instance he showed himself remarkably shrewd in the knowledge of human nature. With a nod and a satisfied smile on his kind face he wheeled round upon Jules, who stood in the background fiercely twirling his moustache and scowling from under his shaggy eyebrows. "And you, mon ami?"

The trooper hesitated, tugging still more savagely at his long-suffering moustache. A hand was laid upon his arm. "Jules, I give my word. You can trust my father's son, can you not?"

The two looked one another in the face, then Bersour turned to the master of Balanot. "M. Broussel, it is a bargain. I will stand surety for the two hundred crowns."

CHAPTER IV

THE TRYST IN THE FOREST

In the shadowy glades of the forest there was a great silence. True, there was to be heard the sleepy twitter of the birds, the low hum of insect-life, the quiet dropping of a withered leaf upon the mossy ground, but these subdued sounds seemed but to intensify rather than to break the stillness. Upon all around it would appear there had fallen the hush of the Sabbath afternoon. Even the distant murmur of a rippling stream fell upon the ear like a mere dream of music, while the stately trees, entering into the spirit of the hour, bent their proud heads in majestic acknowledgment of the greeting of the autumn wind, and held counsel with each other in whispers.

Under the wide-spreading branches of a great chestnut sat Azerole Montoux. In an attitude of utter listlessness, her dark eyes gazing moodily in front of her, she waited immovable as a statue. The minutes passed, but at last her listening ears caught the sound of coming footsteps, and, springing to her feet, she stood expectant. A few moments more and her face lighted up at sight of her brother, who, pushing the brushwood aside, made his way to her through a thicket of saplings and undergrowth.

"Léon, Léon!" she cried, holding o
hands. "I feared something had hinder
that you were not coming to the tryst to-da

"If Michel Roussier had his way, vrain
thing should always hinder. His ingenuit
line is little short of genius."

Apparently Azerole had not heard. She
ask what the delay had been, stranger sti
failed to notice the shadow on her brother's b
Wearily she sat down again, and, drawing him do
beside her, let her head fall on his shoulder with
a long sigh, half of contentment half of pain.

For a few minutes there was silence. Léon roused himself at length. "Chérie, are things no better at Castel Brianza?"

"Worse, I think," returned the girl; in her tone a bitterness which had crept into it of late. "I begin to think Madame must needs have grown to hate me; at least there are times, to-day for instance, when she acts as if she did. I could bear it better, I think, were she but angry; anger would blow over and the fire would clear the air. But her tone of cold displeasure chills me through and through. During all these long months I have done my best to please her, but in vain. And now," this was said defiantly, "and now I mean to try no longer."

"But surely, sister mine, there is still the one bright bit, the little Monsieur Christophe?"

The girl's hard face softened instantly, and for the moment she looked like the old Azerole. "Yes, there is the *petit*. He loves me and I love him.

for him I think that I should die. But," rkened again, "but even Christophe brings Madame is so unwise with him, the one over-indulgent, the next cold, almost harsh, when others are by. This changeableness, doubt, must alienate the boy from her; more- makes him fractious and difficult to manage. not help thinking that, if Christophe de Beauré- had been Madame's own instead of her adopted ild, love would have made the poor little fellow a joy rather than a care. As it is, she makes no secret that he is a burden she would gladly be rid of. Jacqueline, Madame's maid, has told me that Monsieur Christophe's father — his mother is dead—is a French lord, some great man to whom Madame's husband was once under some obligation. She dared not offend him by refusing to keep the boy."

"Poor little man! Neither his father nor any one else seems to care much about him. It is a good thing he has you to love him, Azerole."

"It may be good for him, but like everything else at Castel Brianza, for me it turns out ill instead of well," she returned in her former moody tone. "Madame is like Æsop's dog in the manger; she does not want the child for herself, yet she grudges him to me."

"There surely, little sister, you must needs be mistaken."

"Nay then, but I am not," she asserted positively. "At times, when she glides softly into the room

where Christophe and I are happy together, oh, Léon, her look frightens me!"

"Strange," murmured Léon, "for she must be glad that you take him off her hands."

"Without doubt she is. He gets on so fast with his lessons, and is always good with me. The servants say that both in health and in spirits he is a different child since the coming of Mademoiselle. Yet never a word of thanks does Madame give me, only coldness and silence. I believe in her secret heart she hates me, and—and well, I suppose I am a coward, for I confess she makes me afraid of her."

Silently the lad put his arm round his sister and drew her close.

"And yet, Léon," the girl lifted her face and spoke passionately, "and yet the strange thing is that I *could* love her, yes, I could love Madame, if she would but let me. There is that about her which draws me to her in a way I cannot understand. I feel it even at the very times when she is most cold and distant. Ah me! how could I ever dream that she would permit me to love her? I am but a poor heretic barbette! The only thing left for me is to learn to hate her as she hates me."

Again a silence fell upon the two. Léon's arm was still round Azerole, she did not see his face, and if she had, so absorbed was she in the thought of her own wretchedness, she would probably have supposed that the cloud that hung so darkly on his brow had been brought there only by the story of her wrongs.

After a little pause she went on again, and now there was the sound of tears in her voice. "I think I could bear it all better if only we had news. Oh, why does not Jules return as he promised? Is he afraid to come back and tell us that they are—they are—" She broke down now, and with a pitiful cry of "Mother! mother!" sobbed helplessly, her face buried in her hands.

"Mother—father." The words awoke the gnawing hunger in the lad's aching heart, but he turned resolutely from his own pain to soothe Azerole's. "Chérie, indeed we cannot tell. All may be well with them. Jules must have been prevented returning. But he will come yet. And things will brighten at Castel Brianza. Courage! sister mine."

Azerole dried her eyes. She very rarely broke down as she had done to-day. "No," she said, in her tone the quietness of despair, "no, I am afraid things will ere long be even harder for me. I have not told you all. By the spring Madame's son, M. de Rohan, is expected at the castle. Monsieur Gaston is a captain in the French army. He is quite young, but from hints Blaise and Jacqueline let fall it is evident he is proud and masterful to the last degree. In Madame his mother's opinion, without doubt Monsieur the captain is a piece of perfection; nevertheless, Léon, a strange fancy has taken possession of me that she rather dreads his coming. But, after all, my concern is the trouble there may be in store for me. It is not likely that a Vaudoise barbette will find much favour with this haughty French officer. He cannot fail

to be a red-hot Papist, trained as he has been under a master like Louis XIV. of France."

"Azerole, has it ever struck you that Madame Héloise herself is not a particularly devoted daughter of Holy Mother Church?"

She nodded. "In that as in everything else she puzzles me. True, she is ever markedly civil to Prior Ugon Rorenco when he comes, and I suspect he manages to extract a good deal of money out of her, but I feel sure they mutually mistrust each other."

"Does Madame know that you tell Monsieur Christophe Bible stories?"

"Oh yes. Even had I thought it right to conceal it from her, Christophe would have betrayed it. She has never interfered. At times even she remains in the room on Sundays when we have our Bible talk. I dare say she does not hear a word, for she sits with her back turned to us, and all the time she is reading a French romance."

"Is she reading?" asked Léon meditatively.

"Oh, I suppose so," Azerole returned indifferently. "But soon this will be all changed. I warrant Monsieur de Rohan will teach his mother fast enough to be more strict in her religion. Oh, Léon, I thought my life was hard enough already! Why must it become harder still? Everything looks dark. Behind us and before us all is darkness. Why was it that our father was brought from Dauphiné to the Val Martino? Why were the cruel soldiers allowed to come to Ponefrà that dreadful night? Why did God take our parents and little Stella from us? Why does not Jules come

with tidings? Why are we condemned, you and I, to drag out five long miserable years of our lives here in exile?"

"Why, indeed?" echoed Léon, with a sudden bitterness that was all the fiercer because of the restraint he had hitherto put upon his own feelings for his sister's sake. "Why, indeed? It is all a riddle. Our whole lives are a riddle. Will they be so to the end, I wonder?"

"Our lives a riddle!"—Azerole started. Where—when—had she heard those words before? Slowly there rose up before her a picture. Ah, how vivid it was! The peaceful valley, the sunlit garden, the quaint old presbytère, her mother's face; and then there fell on her ears the low, sweet voice, so tender, so moved, yet so calmly trustful—"*Now* we see in a riddle, but *then* face to face. Meanwhile we can wait and trust, for it is our Father God who has the key." Involuntarily she repeated the words aloud, her voice sounding to herself like one in a dream.

Léon's answer was a short laugh; a laugh without the ring of mirth in it. The sound roused Azerole. And now, looking hastily up, she saw for the first time the cloud on her brother's brow; and a vague fear that something was wrong filled her with sudden dismay. Why had he laughed so scornfully? Could it be that Léon, her brave, noble Léon, was losing his faith in the Vaudois God? Azerole recoiled from the thought, but it pursued her, and upon its heels came another—could it be that her own faith was shaken? She buried her face in her hands, shivering as if from cold. "Her

faith"—what then did it mean, this thing she called her faith?

The minutes passed, and Azerole neither spoke nor moved. That question which the voice within had asked kept sounding in her ears, and pressed for an answer. The faith she had once called hers it was—? Half mechanically, as if repeating the formal words of a catechism, she murmured slowly—"I believe in the God of the Vaudois. I believe in God the Father, whose love is infinite, and can make no mistake. I believe in Jesus Christ the Saviour, who is able to save to the uttermost from sin and sorrow. I believe in the Holy Ghost the Comforter, who is ever with us; our guide in times of perplexity, our strength in seasons of weakness, our very present help in time of need."

Yes, that was her faith. That at least it had been six months ago. Was it the same now? During the past weeks how had she been witnessing for the faith at Castel Brianza? How had she been proving to Léon the steadfastness of her faith? He had asked her to sing a Vaudois psalm that afternoon. She had said she could not sing the Lord's songs in a strange land. Was this then her faith?

Impatient at her continued silence Léon would have spoken; but struck by something in her attitude, he checked himself. A smile, half bitter, half envious, was on his lips. Then *she* at least had not lost faith in prayer. And he? Was he drifting from the old anchorage of childlike trust into the sea of unbelief and unrest?

But the shadows were lengthening in the forest.

Léon saw this and grew uneasy. A movement on his part roused Azerole. Turning swiftly, she flung her arms round his neck. "Léon, Leon, how wicked I have been! How faithless towards God in my heart and life! How selfish! Too self-absorbed even to remember that your life is harder far than mine——"

Léon interrupted her. "Nay, little sister, be just to yourself. At Malanot there is much, very much, to be thankful for. M. Broussel, if at times a little hasty, is as a rule kindness itself. And gentle Madame Justine, in spite of her orthodox terror lest tender-heartedness to a heretic is a sin against the Church, cannot help being motherly, dear little woman. Were it not for Michel life would be almost too easy for me at Malanot. And, all things considered, it is but natural he should resent a despised barbet being put into the very position of trust and responsibility which he, the adopted son of the house, had without doubt hoped one day to occupy himself. It may be that in time his anger towards the Vaudois interloper will cool, and we shall get on together."

He spoke with forced cheerfulness, for he was resolved not to add to his sister's already heavy burden of care. But she was too quick for him. "Léon, you are hiding something from me. I can read it in your face. Ah, do not punish me too sternly! I know I deserve it, but spare me!" Not understanding, he was silent, and she went on passionately. "We made a paction—you remember it?—that we should help each other by unburdening ourselves to one another when we met at our weekly tryst. But—I see it now—I

have been of late so cruelly self-engrossed that I have ceased to be of any comfort to you. Brother, is it too late for me to make amends? I think it would break my heart if that were so."

He saw he must needs yield to her desire, and, truth to tell, he was nothing loth, for the secret trouble that weighed upon him would be lightened if shared with her. "Chérie, were it not that I trust you absolutely, I should not dare tell out, even to you, what is as yet but a mere suspicion in my mind. Listen, then. You know Michel is a frequenter of the taverns, where he is a hard drinker. Some little time ago I found out he plays, and that for high stakes, often losing heavily. You know too, for I have told you, that with regard to business matters M. Broussel is careless and ignorant as a child. Soon after coming to Malanot I began to suspect—now I am sure of it—that the proceeds of the market sales do not all remain intact in M. Broussel's coffers. I have only too good reason to suspect Michel, but as I have nothing definite wherewith to prove my suspicions, I am helpless. The worst is, that Michel, who has the ear of his aunt, will probably find it easy enough, if the deficiencies are exposed, to have the guilt laid at the door of the heretic stranger. There is a look of threatening defiance in his eyes which bodes no good to me unless I keep silent. And how can I continue to do so and be faithful to my trust? Azerole, why are such things allowed? After all these months of honourable service, that it should end in my father's son being branded as a thief!" The lad's face flushed hotly, and the bitter smile again curled

his lips. "Did I not say truly that our lives are a hopeless riddle?"

A little timidly Azerole laid her hand upon his arm. Could she expect that he would listen to her with patience if she spoke to him of the Vaudois faith and hope, the old happy creed in which she herself had so sadly failed of late? At least she would try. "Léon, do you remember the sermon our father preached just before—before—the end at Ponefrà? His text was, '*Now* we see in a riddle, but *then* face to face.' 'My children,' he said—and I can see now the smile with which he said it—'my children, methinks the unravelling of the riddle oftentimes begins for us down here. For a moment God puts into our trembling hands the key to life's mystery. But, my brethren, remember this—if we would read the riddle of our lives let us take heed that neither the joys nor the sorrows of earth blind for us the eye of our faith.' Léon, I have been blind, but now, thank God, I see. I see one like to the Son of Man walking with me in the furnace. And He is with you also, brother, walking methinks the closer, knowing as He does that for Léon Montoux to-day the furnace is being heated seven times."

Once more hope sprang up in Léon's heart. "Chérie, chérie, if you come Sabbath by Sabbath to our trysting-place with a face brightened as yours is now, you will give me courage and make a man of me even yet," he said, speaking playfully to cover deeper feeling.

She shook her head. "Nay, it is I who come to you for courage," she returned. "I was wont to think myself courageous. In the old happy days at Ponefrà

I told myself that for the truth's sake I, Azerole Montoux, could be faithful unto death. How little I knew myself! Already I have been found wanting. Dare I say I have been true to our watchword, 'Lux lucet in tenebris,' when at the first blast of the storm I allowed my light to go out in darkness?"

The self-reproach in her voice found an echo in Léon's heart. Rising hastily he paced up and down the greensward. "Mayhap it is no excuse," he said at length, "but it is hard for us to be strong in the faith without any of our old religious privileges to aid us in the struggle. We have not even a Bible. Our Sabbaths are brightened only because, thanks to the indulgence of those we serve, we are allowed to spend the afternoons together."

A bright thought came to Azerole. "Léon, why should we not hold a little service at our tryst here in the forest, you and I alone? We know great portions of the Scriptures by heart, and we could sing and pray. And in this lonely wood we need fear no discovery. Oh, what a help it would be! Why did we not think of this ere now?"

The eager light in her eyes was reflected in Léon's, but only for a moment. "Chérie, you forget that soon we shall not be able to hold our tryst in the woods. The weather even now is hardly fit for you in the open." Azerole was about to reply, but with a shake of the head he anticipated her. "I know what you would say, but, sister mine, it cannot be. Neither at the farm nor at Castel Brianza dare we attempt such a thing. There are too many prying eyes and

ears about, and we might bring Madame de Rohan and M. Broussel into trouble. As it is I believe no notice is taken of us heretics merely because the Bishop of Saluzzo is an old man with but a lukewarm zeal for persecution, and kind Father Matthieu of Brianza has the soft heart of a child, while the Prior of Lucerna will find it convenient to forget our existence only so long as we are discreet enough not to attract his attention. Methinks he is too worldly-wise to molest us without provocation, seeing that our patrons are among the richest as well as the most powerful supporters of the Church in all the plain of Piedmont."

Azerole, if grave, was not yet without hope. "I feel assured that it is according to the will of God that we should worship Him when we meet together on His own day. Perchance it is but part of the riddle that our way seems for the moment to be barred, and, if we but ask Him, will He not give us faith to believe that in His own good time and way He will unravel it for us?" she asked a little wistfully as she rose and tied on her bonnet which she had tossed aside.

"It may be so, chérie," assented Léon with a surprising heartiness. He drew his sister's cloak more tightly about her, keeping his face the while out of sight lest it should betray him. For a sudden idea had come to him; if feasible, then this particular part of their riddle was already solved. But it was cruel, he told himself, to raise what might prove to be false hopes, so for the present he kept his own counsel.

When they had emerged from the wood Azerole turned into the path leading towards Malanot. "Madame

Justine was so poorly last week, I should like to ask for her before returning to the castle."

But Léon restrained her. "Nay, chérie, we are already later than our wont. It will be dusk ere you reach home. Moreover, Michel is at the farm this afternoon. I do not care to risk your meeting him and being exposed to his rudeness."

Azerole laughed a little unsteadily. "M. Roussier is ever politeness itself to me," she said. "But, truth to tell," she added under her breath, "I had as lief have rudeness if I had my choice." At the same time, however, she retraced her steps, and taking Léon's arm, set off at a rapid pace in the opposite direction.

"Michel Roussier is polite to you!" repeated Léon in a tone of mingled surprise and relief. "I am right glad of that."

The girl made no response. What a colour the keen November wind had given her, thought her brother, as he looked at her with admiring fondness. Simple Léon!

CHAPTER V

TREASURE-TROVE

Having escorted his sister as far as the avenue leading to the castle, Léon hurried back on his way to the farm, which he hoped still to reach in time for the early evening meal; and Azerole, realising among the shadowy trees how late it was, hurried also. While still a little way off she could see that the great gate of the court was closed, and at the sight she quickened her pace to a run. In her haste she caught her foot against a tree root, and would have fallen, had not a figure suddenly sprung out from behind a tree and caught her as she stumbled forward. It was a young man, tall and well-made, but with a stoop of the shoulders that gave him a slouching air. His face was too thin and haggard to be called handsome, and the almost womanly delicacy of his pink and white complexion seemed curiously out of keeping with the restlessness of his black eyes, which even in the fading light showed fierce and bloodshot. He was Michel Roussier, Léon's enemy, a man whom Azerole feared she hardly knew why. Quickly freeing herself from his touch, she thanked him for his timely help, and with a courteous bow of dismissal turned towards the gate. He inter-

cepted her intention, however, by adroitly planting himself in front of her.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," he said, his tone the familiar condescension of one who imagines his attentions confer a favour, "but perhaps you have not yet seen the colouring of the fruit-trees in the orchard; they are one blaze of autumn gold. It is but a step, and the moon will soon be up, if mademoiselle would care to come."

It was with a sense of relief that Azerole heard the step of Blaise, the old castle porter, pacing up and down within the court. "Excuse me, monsieur, but I am already much too late in returning to my duty." Significantly she laid her hand upon the latch of the great iron-clamped gate, but again he was beforehand with her.

"Permit me, mademoiselle," he said, respectfully removing her hand, which he attempted, but in vain, to retain in his grasp. "It is too heavy for you. Allow me." But he did not at once unbar the gate. "Does mademoiselle always put duty before pleasure?" he asked with an insinuating smile.

"It is hardly worth while to discuss the subject, M. Roussier, for in the present case, as it happens, *pleasure* has nothing to do with the question."

Her words were courteously spoken, but their meaning was unmistakable, and she made a second and still more determined effort to open the gate. Sullenly the young man did the office for her, but, as he lifted his hat and watched her pass in, there was an ugly scowl on his brows. A moment more and the ponderous gate swung back in his face.

Old Blaise, who had caught a momentary glimpse through the open doorway of the man's figure skulking in the shadow, hobbled up to the young girl, who was leaning against a pillar, her heart beating faster than her run up the avenue accounted for. "Mademoiselle," he remarked with some severity, "it is too late for you to be abroad alone in these solitary country roads. Take an old man's advice."

"I will, Blaise, I will. In time I shall learn wisdom. I forget sometimes that I am not in my own valleys, where every one was a friend."

"Bene, bene, my child. You will learn, for you are not over proud."

Azerole might have lingered a moment longer talking to Blaise, for he and his wife Jacqueline had been her friends from the first day of her coming to Castel Brianza, and the old man dearly loved a chat; but through the open hall-door the shrill voice of Christophe in irritable altercation fell on her ear. "No, I will not have the door shut and the lamps lit. I will not, I say. Mademoiselle is not come. I always watch for her crossing the court. She will miss me if I am not looking out for her, for she loves me. She has told me many times that she loves her little lame Christophe. *She* does not mind though he is only a cripple hunchback."

There was a defiant emphasis on the last words that alarmed Azerole, for she guessed whose authority the child was defying. At sight of her entering the hall Christophe held out his arms with a shout of welcome, but Madame de Rohan regarded her with

cold displeasure, while with silent significance she pointed to the French clock that ticked upon the high carved mantel-shelf.

"I am very sorry, Madame. I ought not to have stayed so long. It is good of you to permit me to have the Sabbath afternoons to myself. I shall try never again to abuse your kindness."

The apology was humbly made, and the girl's gentle voice was changed indeed from the tone of proud defiance it had too often worn of late. Madame was surprised, it might even be she was touched. But, before she could speak, Christophe, worn out by pain and weariness, and vaguely conscious that Madame Héloise was displeased with his mademoiselle, lost control over himself, and burst into one of the old ungovernable fits of childish rage, which had been comparatively of rare occurrence since he had been under Azerole's care.

"Go away, Madame Héloise. Go away, I say. I love Azerole, and she loves me. And she goes on loving me without ever stopping—to-day, to-morrow, and the next day, and for always. I do not love you at all, madame. Neither does mademoiselle. She told me so. Go away!"

"To-day, to-morrow, and the next day, and for always"—Azerole repeated the words under her breath with dismay. Were they spoken in mere childish innocence? Or was there a meaning underlying them? Little Christophe was strangely precocious at times. Glancing apprehensively at Madame to see whether the words had stung, Azerole was startled by the look

on the other's face. It was not wounded pride, nor was it jealousy; it was not even anger, it was—yes, it was unmistakably pain. Madame's forehead had contracted; mechanically she passed her hand across it, as if to brush away something that hurt her.

Turning to her little charge, Azerole said in a tone of grave reproach, "I cannot love with a happy heart a boy who could speak as M. Christophe de Beaurégard has now spoken to Madame." The little fellow burst into tears; but Azerole, without noticing his distress, had sprung towards Madame de Rohan. "Oh, Madame, he did not mean what he said. He was so angry, he did not know he spoke what was not true. And, indeed, indeed it is my fault, not his. Of late I have not been behaving towards you, Madame, as I ought. I have been so proud, so ungrateful for your kindness. Christophe has heard the way in which I too often have spoken. My example has hurt him. It is all my fault. And it is true that once, when he asked me if I loved you, Madame, I answered why should I love a person who could never love me back? I ought not to have said that to him, for——"

With a haughty gesture Madame de Rohan silenced the girl. "You need not make yourself so unhappy, mademoiselle. I cannot remember of ever having treated you with such affection that you need distress yourself so unnecessarily on the score of your behaviour towards me."

"A sharp rebuke would have been easier to bear," thought Azerole, "than this cold sarcasm." She bit her lip as she turned away to comfort Christophe,

who was whimpering drearily to himself with a burdened sense of having been the cause in some way of all this trouble, which he did not understand. "Chéri, it hurts the good God, you know, when we do wrong. Be a brave boy, and tell Madame you are sorry for having spoken so unkindly to her. Tell her you love her, and are sorry."

Christophe hurriedly mopped up his tears, and clutching hold of his governess's hand, called out in a nervously high-pitched key, "Madame, Christophe is sorry. He will give you a kiss."

For a moment the boy's guardian bent over his couch, with a trembling hand smoothed back the golden curls from his heated brow, touched her lips to his, then swiftly left the hall.

Late that night Azerole, who had caught a slight chill in the wood, was awakened by a violent attack of toothache. Getting up softly so as not to disturb her charge, who slept in a cot beside her bed, she partly dressed, and wrapping round her a warm dressing-gown Madame had given her to have at hand when the sick child had restless nights, crept noiselessly from the room. In a cupboard in Madame's boudoir there was a medicine-chest. In it she knew she would find something to allay the pain of her tooth. She safely descended the stairs, made her way through the intricacies of the long stone corridors, and had her hand on the latch of the boudoir-door, when she was arrested by the sound from within of weeping—deep, heart-breaking sobs—a woman's sobs. Azerole's first impulse was to steal back to her own room again, but something, she

knew not what, withheld her; and, almost before she knew what she was about, she had noiselessly entered the boudoir, closing the door behind her.

At the table there sat a bowed figure, her head buried in her hands, her whole frame shaken by convulsive sobs. Her arms were leaning upon an open desk, on which there lay a packet of letters tied with a piece of broad black ribbon.

"Madame, dear Madame!" Azerole's soft hands were laid against the other's throbbing temples. Madame did not start, nor did she move from her position. Had she heard? Azerole waited, and, standing there, a great wave of pity swept over her heart. This, then, was the real Héloise de Rohan: the other, the one she had hitherto known, was but a woman in armour.

Gently she tried to draw Madame's hands away from her face. "Madame, you are overdone. You will make yourself ill. You must come and lie down on the couch, and I will put a vinegar cloth upon your forehead as I used to do for mother, and soon you will feel better."

The young girl had at times a curiously masterful way with her. The elder woman, scarcely conscious of what she did, mechanically suffered herself to be led to the couch, which Azerole drew up close to the still smouldering fire. A few minutes more and Madame, in a state of utter exhaustion, lay back on the sofa-cushions, while her self-constituted nurse busied herself in deftly changing the cool bandages upon the burning brow. Presently she saw with relief that the expression of pain was softening in the white face.

A quarter of an hour passed, and Madame with a little start looked up. At sight of Azerole she gazed bewildered, but, too languid to speak, she closed her eyes again with a sigh of contentment, lulled to restfulness by the soothing touch of the gentle fingers about her head. It might have been half-an-hour later when she spoke.

"My head is better, thank you, mademoiselle. How did you happen to be here?" Azerole explained what had brought her to the boudoir. "Poor child, did you get the tincture? It was in my chest."

Azerole shook her head as she wrung out another of her cloths. "I think my little touch of toothache went away at sight of—" she stopped abruptly, hardly knowing how to finish her sentence.

The patient moved restlessly. "Ah, yes, I was—I was — yes, I had sat too long thinking, and—thoughts make trouble ofttimes. It was foolish of me to risk it," she concluded hurriedly and somewhat incoherently.

"I think," ventured the girl softly, "I think it is natural, not foolish, for Madame to be sad."

"Why, why do you say so, girl?" There was a sudden sharpness in Madame de Rohan's tone.

Azerole's touch fell gently on the folds of the widow's black dress. "It is enough, Madame," she whispered.

Madame de Rohan's hands clenched. "Enough? Yes, it is enough! But is it all?" and with that she turned her face to the wall. And there she lay without sound or motion, apparently forgetful of Azerole's

presence, unconscious, it would seem, even of the pain that again throbbed in her temples.

"If she could but sleep!" said Azerole to herself; then, as an inspiration came to her, she began to sing, gradually softening her clear, rich notes until they were but a mere whisper of music. The figure on the couch never stirred; but when at last Azerole, in hopes that she had attained her object, stopped to listen to the breathing, Madame said quietly, "My child, it is of no use. Your voice is too like the angels for me to sleep through it. You would have me to stop thinking and go to sleep, is that it? Certes, it were more fitting that you should go back to bed yourself, foolish girl. But, if you must needs have your way, then fetch hither a book and read to me."

Communicating with Madame's boudoir was the library of the Castle. Two hundred years ago books were rarer than now, and for the times Castel Brianza possessed a goodly number. Azerole had never been in the musty old room before, and now, on raising the lamp she had brought with her and scanning the shelves, she recognised with delight among the volumes names which had been familiar to her in her father's study at Ponefrà. Many of the old classics were there, and not a few of the best works of French and Italian poets, philosophers, and theologians.

A little doubtful what to choose, Azerole slowly drew out a worn copy of Pascal's Letters. Its loosened board slipped from her grasp, and in so doing dislodged one or two heavy-looking tomes from their upright position. Hastily removing them for rearrangement, the young

girl was attracted by the sight of a book bound in leather which had been thrust to the very back of the shelf. Her heart beat fast. One glance, and she had known as by intuition what the book would prove to be before she drew it cautiously from its hiding-place. "Already the good God has begun to answer our prayer," she murmured, reverently bending her head over the volume, which was what she had guessed it to be—a French Bible.

With hands that trembled she carried her treasure into the boudoir. "Madame, Madame, oh, what a prize I have found!" she whispered, her voice eager yet cautious. "It is a copy of God's own precious word. Let me read a portion of the blessed Scriptures to you. They will comfort you as naught else could do." Without waiting for permission she laid the Bible on a chair, and, kneeling on the floor, turned over the leaves with reverent and loving fingers, on her face the hungry look of longing which told how sadly the book had been missed during the past months.

"Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me." In low sweet tones the words fell from the reader's lips. Héloise de Rohan listened like one in a dream. But at last her half-stunned faculties awoke. With a little cry she started up.

"Girl, where did you find that—that book?" she whispered hoarsely, pointing fearfully to the Bible on the chair.

Azerole looked up. What did it matter where? she vaguely wondered. It was found, and they could read it. "Listen, Madame, to the rest. Oh, how beautiful it is, how beautiful!"

But Madame Héloise, trembling in every limb, was now on her feet. "See here, child," she said, seizing Azerole almost roughly by the arm, "take that book away. Hide it—anywhere you like—but take it away, away where none can find it. I thought it was destroyed. Take it away out of my sight for ever," and in her excitement she shook the arm she held.

For a moment Azerole felt startled; then, a sudden thought darting into her mind, she forgot all else. "Do you really mean, Madame, that I may hide it where I please?"

"Yes, yes, did not I say so?" Instinctively the girl covered the book with the folds of her dressing-gown. Madame then motioned her away. "Leave me now, child," she said, her tone peremptory. "Leave me, I shall go to bed now."

Grasping her precious burden with both arms, Azerole obediently moved a step or two towards the door, then hesitated, and finally turned back, her expression wistful.

Madame de Rohan saw and read the look. "Child, what would you have? I am a cold, hard woman. My heart is frozen—dead. I have no love to give, none."

"Then, Madame, let *me* love *you*. That will be enough," pleaded the girl, and taking the hand that would have waved her aside she kissed it passionately.

Héloise de Rohan's lips quivered. Softly she laid her free hand on the young Vaudoise's bowed head. "Child, can it be you know me better than I know myself? Know then that, although I would not own

it, no, not even to myself, my heart went out to you, Azerole Montoux, from the first moment I saw you. Yet all the while some fiend makes me try to hate you. Perchance it would be better so, for hark you, Azerole, I only bring a curse on those I love." She shivered, and, putting the girl gently away, said in a voice low with passionate despair: "Ay, love me if you can. God knows I need it!" Then, fearful apparently of once more losing her self-command, she turned resolutely away.

Without a word Azerole slipped from the room. "She would rather be alone," she said to herself.

And she was alone, that sorrowful, beautiful woman —utterly alone.

CHAPTER VI

THE HAUNTED CAVERN

"Léon, hearken, I bring to-day—and that within the week—the first part of the good God's answer to our prayer."

"And I, mon amie, I bring the second."

And the brother and sister, a little breathless with the haste they had made to be the first to reach the forest tryst, greeted each other exultantly, both wondering at the light they saw shining in the other's eyes.

Under her cloak Azerole carried the Bible. It was heavy, and, sinking down on the grass, she exclaimed, with a pretty imperiousness there was no resisting· "Eh bien, monsieur, assuredly I am the one to speak the first, for being what you are pleased to call the weaker vessel, there is grave risk, you will admit, that my news may come to grief, like new wine in an old skin, if I have to bottle it up a moment longer."

She had her way, and Léon, in the interest of listening to her account of what had happened at Castel Brianza on the night of the previous Sabbath, almost forgot that he also had a story to tell. "And now," concluded Azerole, handing the Bible to Léon, who reverently touched the book with his lips, "do you not think,

brother, that our Father God has begun to unravel the riddle by giving us His holy Word? Ah, if we but had a *temple* we are ready now to hold our service, you and I!"

"Chérie, the *temple* is waiting. God has provided it also for us." Azerole's gaze was incredulous, but he smiled reassuringly. At the same time, springing from his seat on the ground, he gave her his hand to help her to rise, telling her it was much too cold and damp for her to sit there any longer. "Let us go and find our *temple*," he said, wrapping up the Bible in the folds of his loose doublet, and leading the way farther into the depths of the forest.

As they followed what might once have been a trodden path, but was now a mere uncertain track through the tangled undergrowth growing rank and wild between the rows of mighty trees, Léon explained that this part of the wood was known as "the Bois Suaire," or the Haunted Forest. Some thirty years before a terrible murder had been committed in the depths of one of the shadowy glades through which they were even now passing, and ever since the place had been shunned by all the country folk, the superstitious people believing that the tortured spirit of the fratricide, unable to rest, wandered to and fro in the wood, filling the gloomy shades with the unearthly wailings of a lost soul. Not far from the spot where the crime had taken place there was, so report had it, an almost inaccessible cave, and in this grotto, now known as the Haunted Cavern, the murderer and his brother—they were foresters—had been wont some-

times to spend the night when they were belated or overtaken by a storm in the wood.

It was the remembrance of this story, which Léon had once heard the farm servants at Malanot tell with bated breath, that had inspired him on the previous Sabbath with the idea that the Haunted Cavern, if accessible, might prove suitable for a winter trysting-place; but, until he knew more, he had judged it best to say nothing to Azerole. So great, however, was the horror with which the Bois Suaire was held that he found it was no easy matter to gain the information he desired. His first attempts were baffled, but in the end, by dint of bribing Jean, the cattleman, with the promise that Mdlle. Montoux would come and sing to his poor invalid daughter, Léon had managed to extort from the old man a whispered description of the road by which the cavern was to be reached. Notwithstanding that he had carefully followed Jean's directions, Léon had met with considerable difficulty in finding the cave, which was so wondrously concealed by rocks overlapping the narrow slit forming the entrance that he had passed and repassed the opening many times before he discovered it. On his way back through the forest he had notched the trees at intervals to mark the route, and by this means he was able to guide Azerole by a direct path.

Not a quarter of a mile distant from their old trysting-place, the wood abruptly terminated on the brow of a sharp declivity, at the foot of which stretched the broad rock-strewn bed of what had

once been a considerable stream. The perilous descent down the precipice, and the scramble across the huge boulders in the river-bed would have deterred less sure-footed and strong-headed mountaineers than our two Vaudois; but even Azerole hardly needed Léon's helping hand as she sprang nimbly and with rapidly rising spirits from rock to rock. It was very different, however, when they groped their way into the gloomy cavern. Her courage seemed then to leave her, and she kept close to Léon, clinging to his arm and scarce able to repress a shudder. Quickly Léon struck a light, and, setting ablaze a heap of dry chips he had collected on his previous visit, exclaimed triumphantly, "Voilà! is not this magnificent? See, there is even a rude fireplace; yonder in the forest we have wood for the gathering, so that as far as light and warmth are concerned we shall have no lack." And the young man, usually so undemonstrative, laughed aloud in boyish glee.

The laugh reverberated in uncanny echoings, hollow and spirit-like groanings which died away in sobbing breaths among the inner recesses of the cavern. Shuddering again, Azerole looked round fearfully, for the twigs Léon had set alight were flickering their last, and the darkness seemed impenetrable. When, she asked herself, when had a laugh been last heard to resound through the Haunted Cavern?

Léon threw a great log on the embers. It took fire with a cheery glow, the flames playing fitfully on

the green slimy walls of the weird place, while the smoke in lazily curling wreaths made its exit by a hole in the roof, which, like the entrance to the cavern, was invisible from the outside owing to the overlapping of the stones. The furniture of the cave consisted of three substantial tree-trunks, two of which did duty for seats, while the third and largest served as a table on which to rest their precious Bible. Slowly and thoughtfully young Montoux turned over the leaves, when a quick-caught breath from Azerole told him that she was half afraid. "Little sister," he said tenderly, "for us there is nothing here to fear. Not a soul would dare venture near this place for love or money. It is believed to be haunted by the spirits of the dead. But with us there will be the Spirit of the living God converting our hiding-place into a very Bethel."

Azerole heard, and a sense of peace stole over her, her nervous tremors vanished, and, when Léon proposed that they should begin their little service by singing one of the familiar Psalms of David, she was ready. The girl possessed a voice of rare compass and beauty; but, as the clear rich tones rose and fell in the vaulted chamber, Léon said to himself that surely never before had her wonderful notes sounded finer. They seemed grand as Heaven's own music, lifting the souls of the worshippers high above the petty cares and troubles of their earthly life.

All too swiftly the happy hour sped away. When they had risen from their knees Léon deposited the Bible in a crevice in one of the innermost recesses of

In the cave.—*Page* 68

the cave; and, having carefully raked out the fire, the two left the place just as the sun began to set behind the forest to the west.

Without any mishap they recrossed the wild chaos of rocks in the old river-bed, and climbed the precipitous bank on the other side. "I wish," said Azerole as they took their way rapidly through the woods, "I wish Christophe could visit our Bethel. The juvenile taste for the gruesome is highly developed in M. de Beaurégard."

Léon glanced back at the way by which they had come. "I fear the day for much less difficult feats than this one will never dawn for him, poor little fellow!"

"I am not so sure of that," rejoined Azerole. Her brother gazed in surprise. "I wish he could see a good surgeon," the girl went on eagerly. "I feel sure he is better in health and less feeble in his limbs than when I came. But Madame is so nervous that she absolutely forbids any effort to prove that progress is being made. But a few days since when we were alone, Christophe and I, he suddenly slipped off the couch and triumphantly put his feet to the ground. I knew Madame would be displeased, so I lifted him quickly back, but I feel sure he bore his own weight for the moment. Who knows but that he might even walk in time? The look of deformity also which was so marked a few months ago is, I feel convinced, passing away. Madame, however, will not hearken to this. It is hard for the boy to be constantly repressed. It was but yesternight he said to me, 'I want to be strong

and well like other boys, mademoiselle. I want to be a man and walk. You say that the good God answers our prayers; may I not ask Him to help me to be a man and walk one day?' Before I had time to reply, Madame, who was crossing the hall, turned round with a strange little cry. I had not thought she was listening to our talk. Her face was quite white, and she beckoned me aside. 'You must not raise false hopes,' she whispered, so excited she could scarce speak distinctly. 'He will never be strong and well like other boys, I tell you, girl, *never*.' I answered her soothingly, for she was terribly agitated, I feared she was going to be ill. When she was gone I told Christophe that certainly we might tell the good God of his wish, and, as our Heavenly Father was ever kind and loving, we could leave it all with Him. But I told him to try not to speak of it in the presence of Madame Héloise, for it made her anxious. But ah, how I long that a clever physician might see the child!"

"Perchance when M. de Rohan comes he will move in the matter."

"Ah, that reminds me I have not told you of another bit of good news. Monsieur de Rohan is not coming, not at least until the summer. Certes, that is good news for me, if not for poor Christophe."

"And I also have a piece of good news to match yours, chérie. After our talk last Sabbath evening I spoke to M. Broussel, and told him frankly that there was, I believed, a hole in his coffer. Instead of treating the matter with incredulity, or eyeing

me with suspicion, which I had feared he would, he said quietly, 'Bah, do not worry yourself, my boy. That has been going on long ere ever you came to Malanot.' Then, as if it were an afterthought, he added carelessly, 'By the way, mon ami, you will shortly have two men's work to do. Michel's health —so says his aunt—is feeble; I am sending him off to Lucernette for change of air. That holy atmosphere—he is hand and glove, is Michel, with Brother Thomas at the monastery—will suit his constitution mayhap better than Malanot for the winter.'"

For the next few minutes Azerole followed her brother along the narrow footpath in silence; but on their emerging from the forest, she said, linking her arm in his, "Oh, Léon! how different all is to-day from our last Sabbath! How good our God has been! Did He just wait until He saw we were trusting, and thus were ready for Him to shower His blessings upon us? We might have guessed the darkness was at its deepest only because the dawn was coming."

"Vraiment, it is indeed wonderful!" reverently responded Léon. Little more was said until they reached the gate of Castel Brianza, where they lingered a moment to arrange for their next meeting. Léon's last words before he hurried off were very unlike the practical unimaginative youth that he was. "Azerole," he said impressively, "a curious presentiment has taken possession of me, that in leading us to the Haunted Cavern in the Bois Suaire, God has a purpose for us there over and above our Sabbath trysts."

CHAPTER VII

LITTLE MAN CHRISTOPHE

The winter of 1686 proved a severe one in Piedmont, but to the two Montoux it passed more happily than at one time they could have believed possible. True, no tidings had yet reached them of their missing dear ones. Jules Bersour had not returned in fulfilment of his promise. Nevertheless Azerole had never given up hope. "I feel sure they are alive, and that we shall all meet again one day," she would say to Léon with unwearying persistency. "And it is just because Jules has not come that I am hopeful. Even were it that he had naught but evil tidings to bring, he would not have forsaken us all these long months. Some ill-fortune hath befallen him, but for that we should have had news." As for Léon, despite the doubts that would at times assail him, he could not help being infected by his sister's unwavering confidence, and the two, sustained by a hope which they believed was God-given, lived on in a spirit of waiting expectancy.

There were times, no doubt, when that very hope of theirs made them chafe impatiently against the bonds that bound them to the land of their exile; but those attacks of home-sick longings were happily

less unbearable than they once had been, and to both there had come a restfulness which, if it was not absolute happiness, assuredly was a full appreciation of the many blessings of their present lot.

Not unnaturally this contentment was in a great measure brought about by the sense that their services were valued in their respective homes. In the absence of Michel Roussier, Léon had become almost like a son of the house at Malanot. M. Broussel and his gentle wife made no secret of the comfort the young Vaudois was proving himself to be, while his influence for good among the servants and peasants about the farms was one that the master felt more than thankful for.

At Castel Brianza also things had changed, and that for the better. Azerole was no longer afraid of Madame Héloise, for, although to all outward seeming Madame's manner to Christophe's governess was but little altered from its habitual cold impassiveness, there was a tacit understanding of friendship between them which was very comforting to the girl. And now and again, when the two were alone together, the mistress of Castel Brianza, laying aside her proud reserve, would treat her young dependant with a kind considerateness which told of growing confidence, if not even of real affection on her part.

Occasionally, when Azerole was seized with a restless fit she would don her warm cloak and hood and betake herself out of doors to battle with the keen sharp wind blowing straight across the plain from the snow-covered Alps. In the very teeth of

the wintry blast she would climb to the summit of a steep hill called the Col de Vaux which lay to the north-west of the Brianza park. On a clear day the view from this eminence was well worth the stiff ascent. Far away to the west towered Monte Viso, the grim sentry of the range, his white crest glittering like a burnished helmet in the winter sunshine, to the east the great plain of Piedmont rolled onward and upward to the very horizon, while to the north, too far off to be distinctly defined even in the clear frosty air, lay the Vaudois valleys, the deep patches of white in the glens contrasting with the dark outlines of the woods and hills. But to this point in the landscape Azerole rarely trusted herself to look. She would stand for long minutes together gazing now at the wide sweep of the undulating plain, now at the whitened peaks of the distant Alps, drinking in the while great draughts of the intoxicating mountain air; then, having taken her fill, she would rapidly descend the Col, returning to the château with eyes and cheeks so brilliant that Christophe would look, and look again, half envious, half admiring, while Madame de Rohan would smile and call her their wild December rose. After this, when the short afternoon light had faded and the lamps were lit, the three would gather cosily round the huge log fire in the hall, and Azerole would read aloud in her musical voice some stirring tale of olden times, while Madame worked at her embroidery frame, and Christophe busied himself with his beloved wood-carving.

This new interest the invalid boy owed to Léon Montoux. At the beginning of the winter Léon, to the entire satisfaction of M. Broussel, had started a wood-carving class for the farm-lads as a counter attraction to the wine-taverns. Christophe, who had conceived an unlimited admiration for the stalwart young Vaudois and considered whatever he did perfection, took the keenest interest in the Malanot wood-carving enterprise. Discovering this, Léon good-naturedly offered to give the child lessons in the craft, with the result that the little fellow showed such a talent for the work that teaching him became a delight.

And so the quiet winter passed away. With the spring came visitors to the castle. Madame de Rohan, necessarily much occupied with her guests, had less time to spare for her little ward and his governess; and, seeing that she continued as rigid as ever in the persistence with which she kept the boy in the background, Azerole and Christophe were perforce left much to each other's society. It proved an eventful spring, however, for Christophe de Beaurégard. By dint of long and gentle persuasion Azerole had gained for her charge the permission that on fine days the invalid might be wheeled out in his couch, either into the sunny court or into the shady orchard, a change which afforded him, at the first at least, unalloyed delight.

One lovely May morning Léon, who had come over to see his sister, and had been directed to the fig orchard by Blaise, found Christophe watching with a pathetically sad look on his pale face, while Azerole, singing snatches of songs to herself, roamed hither and

thither, filling her apron with the wild flowers she and Christophe were to weave into garlands by-and-by. "Eh bien, little-man-Christophe, your face does not catch the sunshine to-day, why is that?" asked Léon kindly as he stooped over the couch.

Christophe sighed. "I will tell *you*, M. Léon," he said confidentially. "You see, mademoiselle and I, we have been praying to the good God for a very, very long time to make me grow up into a big strong man as quick as ever He could. But," Christophe sighed again, "perchance it is that He is busy healing the cripples that prayed to Him before I did. I do not mind the waiting so much when I am indoors, for then I can be busy learning from books, and that is making my head grow into a man's, mademoiselle says. But when I am out here, then I begin to want my legs and my arms to grow. I want to be truly little-man-Christophe and walk." He paused a moment, and Léon, to whom a sudden thought had come, failed to notice the quick kindling of the blue eyes, and to hear the muttered "Certes, I know I could, if they would but let me try. Some day *I will!*" The child's defiant little threat was scarcely uttered when he felt two arms slipped under him, and, almost before he knew what was happening, these same strong, yet careful arms had lifted him up. Christophe's joyful shout as Léon paced up and down with him brought Azerole at a run from the farther end of the grove. At sight of her brother and his tiny burden she uttered a startled exclamation. "Oh, Léon, Léon, Madame——!"

The young man nodded reassuringly. "Madame will be glad." Then, looking down at the flushed little face resting against his shoulder, he asked, "Does it hurt you, little-man-Christophe?" Speechless with excitement and delight the child shook his head. "That is well, for I am going to take you for a long journey—right away through the fruit orchards, and the park, and the vineyards, and the gardens, and the stables, and all round the castle policies."

Christophe gave another shout of delight. "But am I not too heavy for you, M. Léon?" he asked somewhat anxiously. "I heard how, when the barn at Malanot took fire, you carried the calf that was frightened in your strong arms, but perchance I am weightier in myself, for you see the poor calf was only growing into a cow, while I am beginning, am I not, mademoiselle? to grow into a big strong man this day!"

The young Vaudois' laugh was answer enough, and on the three went, the unexpected appearance of the little Monsieur de Beaurégard causing quite a sensation among the men and maid servants. There were everywhere smiles of welcome, and now and again a low-spoken "Bless the little monsieur!" which made Christophe feel at once shy and happy he did not know why.

"It has been like sailing away, away in a big ship!" he cried exultantly, when Léon had brought him back to his couch in the hall, where Madame stood awaiting them with a silent stillness that made Azerole glance at her apprehensively. And, assuredly, no Vasco da Gama could ever have given a more glowing account of his voyage of adventures than did Christophe, while with

pink cheeks and voice pitched high with excitement he incoherently told his guardian of the many places to which for the first time in his life he had been, and of the many wonders he had seen. But still Azerole looked anxiously at Madame de Rohan. Léon had said she would be pleased. Was she so?

"Madame Héloise, are not you glad that I have seen the world?" asked the boy, missing something in his guardian's face.

She bent down and kissed him. "Yes, yes, little boy, I am glad for you, very glad." Then, standing erect and looking at Azerole, she said slowly, "It was a risk, surely it was a great risk." There was no anger in her voice. The girl felt puzzled. What then was there? Could it be there was disappointment? But, turning now to Léon, Madame went on with the courtesy that never failed her, "I am sure, monsieur, it was very kind of you, truly kind. I wish along with Christophe to thank you for all your trouble."

"It was not trouble, Madame; it was a pleasure," returned the young man with his frank smile. "If you will permit me I shall come, whenever the weather is fine, and give Monsieur de Beaurégard a ride in my arms."

Christophe's ecstatic shout saved Madame de Rohan from the necessity of replying further than by a graceful bow of thanks, and Léon left well pleased with his morning's work. But the next day, to Christophe's grief, the weather broke down, and that hopelessly. For the present at least the cripple's further travels must be postponed. But Azerole could not rid herself

of the strange impression that to his guardian this was a relief.

To console the child for his disappointment Azerole devoted herself to his amusement that evening, for even his carving failed for once to distract his thoughts. At last, when tired of games, he begged for one of the Bible stories he so delighted in. The story finished, the two were talking it over together, but in low tones, in order that they might not disturb Madame, who was in the room, when Christophe suddenly called out, "Madame Héloise, I pray you to tell me something. Would Madame, my mother, have taken me to the Lord Jesus Christ if she had not died, think you?" With a quick start Madame de Rohan looked round from her seat in the window. Azerole tried to check the child, for although, strange to say, Madame had hitherto never interfered with the young Vaudois's habit of narrating to her charge stories from the Holy Scriptures, the girl had used her liberty with a caution tinged with apprehension, lest this altogether singular state of matters might through any imprudence on her part be brought to an end. But Christophe was not to be stopped. "Mademoiselle has been telling me about the long, long past, when the mothers brought their little boys and girls to Christ the Saviour, Mary's Blessed Son. The disciples were cross; methinks they were like Brother Thomas. I misdoubt me but they did not like boys and girls. But Christ the Lord did, and He took them up in His arms. I said I was sorry it was not so now, but mademoiselle says it is all the same. She says that now the mothers can bring their

little boys, even cripple hunchbacks like me, to the Lord Christ, and He takes them. But I have no mother to bring me to Him. Will you do it, Madame Héloise?" he pleaded wistfully.

Quickly she turned her head away. "It may be," she said, and her voice sounded huskily, "it may be your mother would not have been willing to give up her little son to Holy Mother Church."

Christophe looked puzzled. "Is that the same thing, mademoiselle?" he asked, shrinking back involuntarily from the suggestion, as if the shadow of Brother Thomas loomed up before him.

"No, no," she protested; "our Father God does not take the little ones away from their mothers when they bring them unto Him for His love and blessing. He is glad that the mothers should have them to keep until the time when He and His Father have need of them up in heaven. Then He comes for them Himself, and He is so loving and tender that the mothers, when they look into His face, are willing to let them go."

"Child, are those words you speak true?" There was a curious eagerness in the sharp question.

The girl's smile was very sweet, and the tone of assurance in her voice carried conviction with it. "Dear Madame, they are not my words, they are the words of God Himself."

"Ah, let me tell her," pleaded Christophe, and, without waiting for permission, he folded his hands and repeated slowly and reverently: "'Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' You see, Madame

Héloise, it must be true, for it is just as mademoiselle says. He does not say 'Let them come to the Church,' but 'Let them come unto Me,' and——"

"Hark! what is that? Who comes at this hour?" cried Madame de Rohan, as the sound of horse's hoofs was heard in the avenue. The gate of the court was thrown open, and the rider's voice pompously greeting old Blaise was distinctly audible to the three in the boudoir. "It is Monsieur my cousin, the Abbé Têtu," murmured Madame hurriedly. Turning to Christophe she whispered, with a peremptoriness of which she was hardly aware: "Not a word of all this before Monsieur l'Abbé. Boy, remember! if you would not get mademoiselle into trouble."

Christophe nodded, and his mouth shut with an expressive little snap. Monsieur Alphonse Têtu, albeit his headquarters and his work were in France, where he was famous as a court preacher, frequently found it needful—on the Church's business, without doubt—to visit Piedmont; and, when there, he rarely forgot to pay his devoirs to his kinswoman at Castel Brianza. But to Christophe de Beaurégard, at least—children are wonderfully shrewd readers of the characters of their elders—these visits of Monsieur l'Abbé were unwelcome. The cripple looked enviously now after his governess, who, at a sign from Madame de Rohan, was making her escape from the room by a side door.

Azerole was afraid of the Abbé Têtu. True, she had only seen him once, but the impression he had then made upon her she was not likely to forget. There had been no warning on that former occasion of the priest's

arrival. He had come at the end of a glorious day in the late autumn. Tempted by the unusual sultriness of the evening the trio at the castle had been lingering later than their wont in the sweet-scented court, enjoying the magnificence of the sunset glow. At Madame's request Azerole had been singing to them first one then another of the gay little French *chansons* she had learnt from her mother in the bygone days. And so it had happened that none of the party had been aware of the approach of Monsieur l'Abbé, who came up the avenue on foot, having given his horse to a groom he had chanced to meet. Even old Blaise, listening also to the music, his hand at his ear, had been for the moment off his guard by the open gate, and Monsieur Têtu was in the midst of the little group before they knew. Azerole could only too distinctly recall Madame de Rohan's start and look of fear. The next instant, however, she had recovered, and was again her haughty self as she had imperiously signed to Christophe's governess to wheel the invalid's couch back into the hall.

And now on this second coming of the Abbé it was with the sense of escaping from some vague peril that the young Vaudoise hurried up the stairs to her own room, where she locked herself in, and, sinking down on a chair, tried, but not altogether successfully, to drive from her mind the vision that rose up before her, the vision of a bad man's face. His thin lips with their cruel smile, his steel-grey eyes, cold yet cunning, made the Abbé's heavy but powerful face one to be remembered as well as feared. When on

his former visit the keen glance of the priest had for an instant lighted upon the Vaudois stranger, she had known as by intuition that in the sight of this haughty ecclesiastic Azerole Montoux, an accursed Vaudoise heretic, was a creature to be spurned under foot, or at best to be degraded to her proper place as the lowest menial of the Castel Brianza establishment. Moreover, Alphonse Têtu was a friend of Ugon Rorenco, the Prior of Lucerna, and the young girl's dread of the two priests was not lessened by a suspicion that both men were secretly feared by the proud mistress of Brianza.

Late that night, when the Abbé Têtu had retired to his room, Jacqueline summoned Azerole to attend upon Madame in her boudoir.

"Sit down, mademoiselle," said Madame Héloise, her tone somewhat constrained, or so it sounded to the young governess. "I have just learned from the Abbé news which concerns you. It seems that the Duke of Savoy more than a year since issued a proclamation to the effect that the Vaudois in prison or elsewhere were free to leave the country and go as exiles to Switzerland. Prior Ugon regrets all too late, it would appear, that he did not acquaint you and your brother with this important announcement. He wishes you now to know, however, that it is not yet impossible for Monsieur and Mademoiselle Montoux to avail themselves of the Duke Amadeus' edict. Through Monsieur l'Abbé Têtu passports can be provided and a safe conduct guaranteed. Accordingly I wish to inform you, mademoiselle, that I shall put no hindrance in the

way of your rejoining your people." Was the slow subdued voice that of caution merely, or was there underneath a touch of unexplained and unexpressed regret? It was hard to say, for the speaker's face was averted.

"I thank you, Madame," was the quiet reply. "We had heard of the proclamation, that is, my brother Léon had, but we did not intend then to leave the country; we do not now." The elder woman turned and looked keenly into the girl's face. "Madame has perhaps forgotten the promise my brother gave to Jules Bersour?"

No, as it happened, Madame had not forgotten. "Such promises are generally made to be broken when the need-be arises," she said lightly.

Azerole drew herself more erect. "The promise of a Vaudois, given before God, is made to be kept, Madame."

The lady's brow contracted suddenly. "Do you hold, then, that all promises are sacred?—that it is criminal to break a vow, no matter what—what it might entail to the one who vowed?" she asked, her tone hard, her face again averted.

Azerole thought a moment. "I think my father would have said that it is quite right to break a *bad* promise. But I know full well that he would have said that we, Léon and I, must needs keep our pledged word, inasmuch that there were those who would lose by our gain. Jules Bersour knew he could trust my father's son to keep faith."

"And so, altogether against your will, you are forced to stay where you are?"

Touched, she hardly knew why, by the question, Azerole drew a step nearer. "A year ago, Madame, to stay would have been altogether against my will. But everything now is so changed. I love you, Madame Héloise, and I love Christophe. You are so kind to me, you never seem to remember that I am but a poor heretic barbette. Even the servants care for me, and let me care for them. If it were not that my heart is often sad, almost to breaking, for news of my parents and little Stella, I could be happy—nay, I *am* happy —at Castel Brianza. You have made it *home* to me, Madame."

Madame de Rohan had covered her face with her hands while the girl was speaking, and now the hot tears fell and trickled slowly through her fingers. "I weep, but it is for very gladness," she said brokenly. "Child, child, have you been sent here to save a soul from a life—nay, a death rather—of despair?"

Azerole was now on her knees beside her. "Ah, Madame, you are so lonely, so terribly lonely, and so sad? But every day I pray to the good God to comfort you, and——"

"You pray for me?" the other repeated drearily. "I never pray for myself, I am afraid."

"Afraid of the good God? Afraid of the Father who loved us so much that He gave up His Son even to the death that we might be brought back to the shelter of the everlasting arms? Afraid of the loving Father who cares with a tender-hearted pity for those of His children who are burdened and sad? Ah no, no!" cried Azerole vehemently. "It is because

your Church hides the Father and His Son Jesus behind Mary and the saints, and the priests and their rites and ceremonies, that you do not know the true and loving God. But we Vaudois, we go straight to God through Jesus Christ our Saviour, as the Holy Scriptures command us to do, and He speaks straight to our hearts, and we are comforted. And, if we have done wrong, for the blessed Christ's sake He forgives us."

To this there came no reply, and a long minute or two of silence passed. At last Madame roused herself, and sitting up, said hurriedly, "The Abbé Têtu has this evening been trying to persuade me to command you to put yourself under his offered protection, but I refused. If you accepted his offer, I told him, it must be of your own free will. So long as you wished to remain, there would be a home for you at Castel Brianza." Azerole's "I thank you, Madame," expressed more than the simple words. With an uneasy glance towards the door to make sure it was closely shut, Madame whispered, "I do not trust monsieur my cousin. Child, hearken; I tell you to beware of him. Until you abjure, he is your enemy, remember that. Beware of him, and of the Prior, and of Brother Thomas. *I* may forget; *they* will never forget that you are a Vaudoise."

The girl made no reply. At the mention of the Prior and Brother Thomas she had started, and turned a little pale. But it was of her brother she was thinking. If these men were her enemies, were they not Léon's also? she asked herself breathlessly. And who could

tell what evil to him they might not try to do with the help of Michel Roussier? Aloud, however, she said nothing of this new anxiety, and presently, fearing to intrude longer, she rose to go. Madame de Rohan rose also, for it was getting very late. She was lighting her silver hand-lamp when she caught sight of something lying on her desk which she had well-nigh forgotten. It was a silk purse, which she held out to Azerole. "Voila! ma chère, your salary as Christophe's governess for the past year. It was careless of me to allow it to be so long overdue."

Azerole stood in silent bewilderment. "Madame," she stammered at last, "I could not take this, indeed I could not. It is kind on your part, kind beyond words to give me, a poor Vaudoise, shelter and food and clothing; and in all this you have been, ah! *so* good and generous! You made no agreement, Madame, to——"

The lady silenced her with a gesture almost of entreaty. "Yes, yes, I know; but, child, if you love me, let it be so." Then, as Azerole still shrank back distressed, she went on, and now the girl could see that her eyes were darkened by a shadow of pain, "If you must have the truth, know then that it is a debt, it is but in payment of a debt my—my family owes to yours."

More bewildered than ever, Azerole knew not what to say, for there was that in her benefactor's face that forbade questioning. She laid her hand on Madame's in mute token of gratitude. Then, as a thought struck her, a wave of colour crimsoned her cheeks, and with an exclamation of distress, she thrust the purse away. "I cannot! nay, then, I cannot! In truth it would not

be honourable without telling you that, by paying me this, you are but helping to—to—to send me away from you!"

It was Madame Héloise's turn to feel mystified, but only for a moment. She was quick-witted, and the naïve simplicity of the girl's embarrassment was curiously transparent. It hardly needed Azerole's hurried words to explain the difficulty. "Léon has for a year past been saving all his earnings. He keeps them hidden in —I mean at our trysting-place. He says we cannot tell but that the time may come when we shall want the money to buy our freedom before the five years——"

As the girl paused abruptly, a little uneasy lest she had already betrayed more than her brother might approve, a faint smile flickered for a moment on Madame de Rohan's lips. With a touch of authority she placed the purse in Azerole's hand. "Accept it from me," she said. "Do with it what you please. Use it, or," she lowered her voice, "or keep it. Only give me fair warning before your hoard amounts to two hundred crowns. Meanwhile, your secret is safe with me."

A simple "I thank you, Madame," was all Azerole was able to falter, but perhaps the affection and trust that glowed in her eyes spoke for her more eloquently than she imagined, for, as she once more turned to leave the room, Madame drew her close, and, taking the fair face between her hands, touched the girl's forehead with her lips. It was the first kiss, but it was not to be the last.

CHAPTER VIII

HÉLOISE DE CASTELANE

The next morning, the Abbé Têtu not yet having taken his departure, Madame de Rohan despatched Azerole to spend the day at Malanot with Madame Broussel, who had been suffering from one of her bad attacks of asthma.

Azerole was disappointed to find that Léon had not yet returned from Pinerolo, where he had gone the day before to attend the market in place of M. Broussel, who did not wish to be so long absent from his wife.

From Madame Justine, however, the young Vaudoise received a warm welcome. "Ma chère, but you are the very person I am in need of. Hyppolyte, dear man, he does not learn, for all his sixty-five years, how to treat sick folk. When I am lonely, as to-day, he prescribes solitary confinement; when I am in a fever he turns a mob in upon me, declaring I am sick only for the want of seeing some one prettier and livelier than Hyppolyte Broussel! Ma foi! what it is to have such a husband!" and little Madame Justine laughed till she coughed and cried by turns.

Azerole laughed with her, busying herself the while in performing for the invalid and her room the many little offices which only a woman's hand skilled in sick-nursing knows how to set about, and then, sitting down

on a low stool beside her friend, she chatted to her of all the gay doings at the château.

The day was sultry, and after dinner, when the farmer had again gone out of doors, Madame Justine and Azerole betook themselves to the vine-trellised balcony.

"You are weary, Madame; what can I do for you?" asked the girl, noticing the tired look in the elder woman's voice.

"Nay, not weary, only a little sad, child." The words came slowly, and the faded blue eyes wandered over the vineyards in the direction of Lucernette.

Azerole, following the look, forbore to question the reason of the other's sadness. She had come to know that the wild ways of Michel Roussier were too often the cause of that expression of patient sorrow in the pale face of the mistress of Malanot. "She has heard news of some fresh misdemeanour," thought the girl. Aloud she said softly: "Shall I sing to you, Madame? You always say it rests you."

The invalid brightened. Bending forward she whispered, glancing furtively the while towards the door, "I should much like that song of yours about the Shepherd. Ah! Mother of God!" she added half apologetically, "certes, thou wilt forgive, for thou knowest that I and mine are naught but poor foolish sheep in need of the good Shepherd's care!"

"Does she know it?" asked the girl simply.

Madame, though she moved uneasily, made no reply; and Azerole, without waiting for a second invitation, began to sing in a low but clear voice the heart-

comforting words of the twenty-third psalm. By the time she came to the end a tear was rolling down the thin cheek of the sick woman. Madame Broussel wiped it half guiltily away. Azerole sang the psalm again and yet again, slower and ever slower, until with a satisfied smile she stopped. Her patient was asleep.

When Madame Justine awoke from her doze she was full of regrets that she should have wasted in sleep a whole hour of her visitor's company. "And now, ma chère, I misdoubt me but you will be saying you must be hastening back to the château!" she sighed.

"No, not yet," returned the girl. "Madame Héloise said I might stay with you until late. After to-morrow visitors are again expected, and I shall not be so easily spared."

"Child, is there not word yet of the captain, Monsieur de Rohan's coming?"

It was Azerole's turn to sigh. "He may be here any day now."

There was trouble in her voice, but Madame Justine did not notice. "I am longing to see the lad. As a boy he was indeed the true son of his mother. But who can tell? Fifteen years is a long while. But indeed, and if the years have altered the son as they have altered the mother, Gaston de Rohan will be changed indeed. Hélas! my poor Héloise de Castelane!"

Azerole looked up eagerly. "Ah, Madame, tell me of Héloise de Castelane!" she asked, then checked

herself. "Pardon me. It is perhaps an impertinence of me to ask."

Madame Broussel smiled a little sadly. "What I know the whole world may know. What Justine Broussel knows not Madame de Rohan tells to none. After all there is but little to relate. You know, child, that Madame is French as we are. It was during the political troubles of Louis XIII.'s minority that the old Baron de Castelane, and my father, and Hyppolyte Broussel's crossed over into Piedmont. The Castelanes were of the noblesse, and we but of the upper farmer class; but companions in exile draw together, and the baron was not proud. I was much older than Mademoiselle Héloise, and the petite would have it that her chère Justine must needs mother her, the child's own being dead. Ah, how we all loved her, our mademoiselle, and how proud we were of her! She was so beautiful, so clever, so warm-hearted, and withal so bright and gay——"

"Madame de Rohan bright and gay?" echoed Azerole incredulously.

"Bright!" repeated the other with an indescribable intonation. Then, words failing her, she sighed. After a moment or two's silence she resumed her narrative. "Then came the old but never worn-out story of the love of a brave knight and his fair lady. Bayard, Major de Rohan, was a distant kinsman of her own, as brave and handsome a gallant as one might wish to see. But, hélas! when the day came and he carried her away to France, we that remained felt desolated. She came back, however, once and again. The last time

she brought her children, the boy Gaston, and his two pretty little sisters. That was when our old baron died. After that came news from Dauphiné from time to time, woeful news indeed—her two sweet little girls, and most sorrowful of all, her husband—all of them taken from her one by one. Some cloud hung over the death of Major de Rohan, we could never learn what, for after that we lost her. Ay, we lost her," repeated Madame Justine, meeting Azerole's wondering look. "I know now that my letters never reached her, nor did hers come to Malanot. Then but two years since there came a hurried note. Madame de Rohan was returning to Castel Brianza. She had given orders to have the château fitted up for her arrival. And, sure enough, when Hyppolyte rode over to inquire, he found workmen busy all over the place outside and in. A few weeks more and she came. And she was—as you see her now." Madame Broussel stopped with a long-drawn sigh.

"Did she speak to you of what had happened since?"

The elder woman shook her head. "I asked her once. I dared not ask her again. 'If you love me, Justine,' she said, in that strange still voice of hers, 'if you love me, ask me naught. Let the past be buried. I do not feel it or anything now. My heart is dead.'" Madame Justine folded and unfolded her hands, a movement with her expressive of distress. "I know better than that. When people tell you their hearts are dead, it only means they wish they were. She comes often to Malanot. But there is

ever a something between us, a dark veil she will not ever raise."

"Poor Madame, it is hard for you!"

The word of sympathy did the other good even while it brought the tears. "Yes, ma chère, it is hard. But," here her voice brightened, "but, child, it has struck me that, since you have come to the château, the shadow in my poor Héloise's eyes is somewhat less dark. Do what you can for her, my girl. Hélas! she has no one belonging to her now except Monsieur the captain, and he, of course, can be but seldom with his mother."

"There is little Monsieur Christophe, Madame."

Madame Broussel shook her head doubtfully. "Adopted children are but poor make-shifts at the best. I mean," she added hastily, lest Azerole might suppose she had been thinking of Michel, "I mean other people's children who are no relation whatsoever."

"Then you think Christophe is no relation to Madame de Rohan?" asked the young girl, a curious intonation in her voice.

Madame Justine shook her head again, this time decidedly; but, before she could say anything in reply, the heavy footstep of the farmer was heard ascending the balcony stair. There was a cloud on M. Broussel's brow, but it cleared somewhat at sight of the pair seated so cosily under the vine-trellis.

"What is it, my Hyppolyte?" asked his wife, quick to read his face.

"Tiens, little wife, not much. Only that our precious nephew has come back, six months too soon I told

him, which I confess was not quite too hospitable of me. He has come to tell me that, his health having improved of late, he has the notion that Malanot after all will suit him better for climate than Lucerna or Turin. Ma foi, but he is a rolling stone!" Azerole had started with sudden dismay at this news, though she said never a word. But something in her face struck the farmer when she rose to go, and, dense as was his wont, he read it upside down. "Ah, mademoiselle, you are thinking he has but just come in time to see you home, eh? He will be round the moment he has attended to his horse, and——"

But Azerole, murmuring something about not having time to wait, hurriedly said her adieux, and had made good her escape before there was any sign of M. Roussier.

With a little chuckle Farmer Broussel wheeled the invalid's chair into the sitting-room, and his wife, glancing at him, read the thought of his honest heart. "She is a dear girl, very dear, but, Hyppolyte, you forget——"

"Forget?" growled the farmer. "I forget nothing."

"That she is a heretic," finished his wife, in a tone of distress.

"Justine, ma chère, you see only a little way. Now I can see farther, and what I behold is this—mademoiselle, with her pretty ways, has tamed Michel into a decent fellow, and we—that is, you and I—have converted her into a good Catholic."

The little woman shook her head sagely. "My Hyppolyte, your spectacles have too much of the

rose-tint for you to read sober-coloured truth at so great a distance. Hélas! yes, she is a heretic, and a heretic she will remain. Yet, in despite of this—nay, at times I ask myself is it because of this?—she is most sweet. But there!"—Madame Justine's horrified look of self-reproach was almost comical—"I am a heretic myself, Father Matthieu would say, to utter such a word. I will say this, notwithstanding," the speaker's gentle voice waxed indignant for the moment, "it was none other save Brother Thomas himself who told me false concerning the Vaudois. 'These cursed barbets,' he said, 'they believe neither in God nor in the devil.'"

"Bah!" disgustedly interrupted her husband, his brow furrowed at the mention of the friar, who was no favourite of his. "All I say is that the barbet of Malanot, Monsieur Léon Montoux, has taught me, as I have never been able to learn it heretofore, how one may truly believe in God Almighty and in His power to make a young man act uprightly. Now there was that same holy friar the other day urging me to cast the lad adrift. It was no sin in the eyes of the Church, quoth he, to break faith with barbet-devils. 'Allons, allons, father,' said I, 'but when I see *you* break with their master, the foul fiend himself, it will be time for Hyppolyte of Malanot to break faith with the barbets of the Valleys.'" The excited farmer took a turn or two through the room. "They do not believe in the devil they are named after, do they not? Eh bien, so long as our dear Michel preserves himself in his usual health and temper there is no great fear, I swear,

that any of us at Malanot are like to doubt the existence of the devil." Then, catching sight of the pained expression on the face of his gentle Justine, the big heart of Hyppolyte smote him sharply. "Tiens, tiens, my little wife, you understand that all I meant was merely that at his present stage of development"—the speaker, with or without intention, uttered the last word with syllabic slowness—"there is no immediate danger that any of us should confound our good nephew with Michel the archangel. For the rest we have always said—have we not?—that when the lad had finished his—humph—well, his somewhat tedious sowing of wild oats, he will turn out a fine fellow, the prop of our old age, eh? For the present, patience, voilà tout!"

In the meanwhile Azerole, glancing cautiously about while she tied on her bonnet, had slipped down the balcony stair, across the court, and into the lane beyond. It was a good mile and a half to the château. Would the waning light of a summer evening make the short cut through the pine-wood practicable? She would venture it. Anything to gain time. As she hurried along she tried to laugh away what she called her foolish fancies, but she did not wholly succeed. And, had she but known it, she had more cause for her fears than she dreamt of. Michel Roussier was in love, not merely with her face, as she had imagined, but with herself. From the first moment he had seen her his heart, for he had one, had been taken by storm. True, the maiden, so he had told himself, was a heretic barbette, altogether beneath his, Michel Roussier of

Malanot's notice; but that fact had invariably been lost sight of while he was in the young Vaudoise's presence. So long as he might gaze into her bewitching brown eyes and listen to the sweet tones of her voice, the whole strength of his wild, ungoverned nature was moved to passionate adoration. But from the first it had been plain to him—Michel was quick in some ways—that Mademoiselle Montoux by no means reciprocated his sense of attraction. On the contrary, the girl seemed to recoil from him, and the suspicion of this, while it maddened him, only spurred him on the more to force his attentions upon her. While he had been at Lucernette she had pretty successfully contrived to avoid meeting him on his frequent visits to his aunt at the farm, and her hopes had risen high when she heard that M. Broussel, anxious to separate his nephew from bad companions at home, had secured a good situation for Roussier at Turin. "In the novelty and whirl of life in a town he will soon forget," she had said to herself. And now that hope was at an end. Her trouble of mind was greatly increased by the conviction that, if Roussier continued to annoy her, there was no course open to her but that of speaking to Léon. Hitherto she had shrunk from doing this, fearing to intensify the already strained relations between the two young men. It was well she did not know how completely Roussier was now under the influence and in the power of his boon-companion and confidant, Friar Thomas, else she would have realised that, if she were driven to embitter Michel still more against Léon, Roussier would have a powerful ally to fall back upon,

one who would not be slow to whisper evil counsels into his ear.

Azerole had gained the footpath in the wood, and was congratulating herself upon that same fact, when the sound of a rapid footstep behind made her start with sudden dismay. In another moment Michel Roussier, heated and flushed, was by her side. "Good evening, Mademoiselle Montoux. Allow me to have the pleasure of escorting you on your walk through the wood. You see I have returned home, mademoiselle. The fact gives *me* at the least great pleasure." There was no mistaking the meaning of his half-insinuating, half-questioning smile.

"Your aunt Justine I am sure is pleased," returned the girl, struggling both with her fears and her indignation at the insolent familiarity of his tone.

"And mademoiselle herself?" he persisted, trying to force a way for his tall person alongside of her in the narrow path.

She made no reply. Adroitly contriving to thwart his attempt to come nearer, she flew over the ground at a disconcerting rate of speed, her thoughts meantime keeping pace with her feet. Anxious as she was to avoid rousing his violent temper, she was realising even more clearly the need there was for putting a stop at once to his attentions. At last she turned and faced him. Her look was grave, and her voice, though gentle, was firm. "It is kind of you, M. Roussier, to offer to accompany me through the wood. But indeed I do not require your protection. I am accustomed to walk alone, and I *prefer* it."

There was no mistaking her meaning. But it seemed

as if he would not be repulsed. "I had hoped, mademoiselle, that your liking for me might have grown somewhat during these months."

Had she guessed that it was love, not anger, that glowed in his eyes with a fire that seemed to scorch her when he bent his face near hers, she would have answered with something less of coldness in her tone. "Monsieur, you make a great mistake. A liking which does not exist cannot be said to grow. It does not, nor will it ever."

He stood for a moment or two, as a man stands to recover from the stunning effect of an unexpected blow. Without looking at him Azerole, though trembling in every limb, turned and once more pursued her way. Presently the path led her round a sharp corner. Her straining ears could catch no step following, and by the time another quarter of a mile had been covered, she was fain to sit down, overcome by a feeling of faintness. It soon passed, however, and she once more got hurriedly to her feet. Why had this been permitted? she asked half-despairingly. Life had become of late so peaceful, so bright. And now the clouds were gathering fast again—Michel come back, monsieur the captain coming! How should she steer her little bark in safety through the storms that threatened? And then she chid herself sharply. What was the faith worth that could trust only when the sky was blue? Had not God proved Himself faithful, ay, and more, all these months back? Yes, twenty times yes, she could and she would trust Him. He had the key; He would unlock the riddle by-and-by.

And now the end of the path leading out of the wood was in sight, and not a hundred yards beyond was the thicket of mulberry-trees bordering on the Castel Brianza domains. Five minutes more and she would be within the park. Then it was that stepping from out the shadow of the wood, she saw what made her heart die within her. Leaning against a tree stood Michel Roussier. He had been refreshing himself largely from the spirit-flask he carried in his pocket, and the drink had put new life into his worse self. As he came closer the young Vaudoise smelt his breath and involuntarily shrank back from him.

Michel saw the movement and sneered. True to the doggedness of his nature, he was not to be nonplussed by a maiden's coquetry. For that it was but coquetry he never once doubted. That a poor heretic Vaudoise should feel anything but honoured by the attention of a Piedmontese signore like himself was a thing too incredible to be imagined. Michel loved this demoiselle, at once so bewitching and provoking; and he was resolved, nay, had he not sworn to win her? What mattered it that she was of the accursed faith? In an amazement of gratitude for the gift of his hand, she would consent to change her creed as joyfully as her name. In the meantime she needed taming, that was plain. But it was not so plain to his pride-blinded eyes that throughout the process the tamer must needs act warily.

"In this part of the country, mademoiselle, the rules of knighthood do not permit a gentleman to leave a lady unprotected on a lonely road. But I

am ignorant, I confess, of the laws of society among the Vaudois."

The covert sneer underlying the last words roused in the girl the spirit of the Montélimarts. "In my part of the country, monsieur," she replied, disconcerting him with the hauteur of her glance, "a demoiselle would despise as counterfeit a knightliness which forced its championship upon those who did not make it welcome."

This from a Vaudoise! It was intolerable. Smarting under the pain of wounded pride, Roussier, but little used to self-restraint, lost control of his temper. "Have a care, mademoiselle," he said, his voice thick with passion. "Have a care! Heretics are not in such high favour in these days that a barbette can afford to flout the first gentleman who shows her civility. Have a care, mademoiselle, else it may be the worse for you *and yours*."

This last shaft hit the mark. Azerole changed colour. Even in the waning light Roussier was quick to see her growing paleness, and made clumsy haste to push the advantage he had gained. With a swift movement she had turned to pass through the wicket leading into the mulberry grove; but, intercepting her, he placed his hand across the bar. "Not so fast, mademoiselle. It may be that I can find means to force you to bend your proud head — what then?" He hissed the words through his clenched teeth with a fierce vehemence before which a less high spirit than hers would assuredly have quailed. Whether she would have succeeded in maintaining her calm

demeanour for much longer it is hard to say, but at that juncture there opportunely appeared a new-comer on the scene. Pushing aside the drooping branches of the trees fringing the plantation, he strode on to the path with a stern "Hallo! sirrah! And what bold coward may this be who dares speak of using force towards a demoiselle?"

The stranger was a young man of about five or six and twenty, dressed in the uniform of a French officer. He was tall, broad of chest, with an erect and easy bearing that told no less of robust health than of his military training. His complexion, naturally dark, was tanned to a rich bronze, and his face, with strong rather than fine features, was certainly striking, if not regularly handsome.

His look was stern enough now as he came forward, and Roussier's shifting eyes quailed beneath the fire that flashed in the other's. "How now, sirrah! Hands off!"—this with a light touch with the flat of his sword on Michel's hand which rested on the gate. "I will relieve you of the charge of this demoiselle, if so be she will permit me, albeit I am ignorant both of her name and home," he added, bowing courteously to the girl.

"I will tell you, my fine monsieur, who she is," sneered Roussier, enraged at the interference of this impertinent coxcomb. "She is no less a personage than Mademoiselle Azerole Montoux, the Vaudoise barbette of Ponefrà."

The shot missed fire. Turning to Azerole, the young officer doffed again his plumed hat, and bowed lower

than before. "It gives me great pleasure to make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Montoux, my mother's friend. Pray allow me, mademoiselle, to have the pleasure of conducting you to the château. We shall leave this *gentleman*" (with an indescribable emphasis on the title) "to the uninterrupted enjoyment of his own society."

So saying, and without deigning so much as a look at Michel, Gaston de Rohan, for it was he, turned his back upon him, and held open the gate for Azerole to pass through. And Roussier, baulked of his revenge, stood gnawing his moustache, and watched the pair until they were out of sight among the trees of the grove. "Baulked of his revenge"—was it so? Hardly, if the malevolent scowl that darkened his brow meant anything.

Recovering somewhat from her mingled fright and bewilderment, Azerole slowly took in the fact that this noble-looking chevalier, who had constituted himself her protector, was none other than Madame's son, the dreaded Monsieur de Rohan, who had, it would appear, arrived at the château in her absence. Happily, it did not occur to her to wonder whether this knightliness was but the polished veneering of French gallantry which was then in vogue at the brilliant but false court of "Le Grand Monarque." With her woman's keen insight she had read, and read correctly, the manly honesty of the clear eyes that had looked for a moment into hers. In this respect, at least, Madame Justine would have said Gaston de Rohan was still the true son of his mother.

Side by side the two walked slowly through the greenwood path. He could see that she still trembled, yet he did not offer her his arm. He was too wise for that. By-and-by he began to talk, adroitly leading her thoughts away from her late disturbing adventure. She became interested, and before long found herself responding with an ease that would have greatly astonished herself had she pictured this meeting beforehand; while, on his side, Gaston found himself attracted no less by the winsomeness of his companion's beauty and modest grace than by the signs he was quick to read of her intelligence and culture.

They had crossed the park and were nearing the château when he asked, with a sudden change of tone: "Mademoiselle, that scoundrel's threat meant nothing, I warrant? You have naught, I trust, to fear from him?"

Her face clouded. "For myself, monsieur, I fear nothing," she said in a low voice. "With Madame, your mother, I am safe. It is for Léon, my brother, I am afraid. It is but too likely that M. Roussier has it in his power to do him a mischief."

A skilful question or two led her to explain her words more fully, but, all at once awakening to the realisation of her own rashness in thus bestowing her confidence upon a stranger, and he a bigoted Papist, she grew reserved, even cold in her replies. And de Rohan, quick to notice her altered mood, at once turned the conversation into less personal channels.

Arrived at the château they found Madame Héloise

awaiting her son in the hall. But was this in very deed the mistress of Castel Brianza? Azerole asked herself as she gazed in amazement at the transformation which a few hours had effected. Sheltered from observation in the corner behind the high-backed couch of little Christophe, who was watching with fascinated admiration the tall chevalier's every movement, Azerole stole yet another furtive glance at Madame de Rohan. She stood with her arm linked in that of her son; her beautiful face, moved out of its wonted cold impassiveness, was radiant with a great gladness, a bright colour was in her cheeks, and the smile that lit up her brilliant eyes was but the reflection of that which played upon her lips. She was dressed too with scrupulous care, and in honour of her son she wore that evening some old family diamonds, not many, as was the showy fashion of the day, but a few rare stones that flashed with a dazzling splendour in the lamp-light. Azerole stood spell-bound for a moment, then turned swiftly away. "To-night," she said to herself as she mounted the stairs to her own room, "to-night I have seen Héloise de Castelane."

CHAPTER IX

MONSIEUR DE ROHAN

In a summer-house overshadowed by luxuriant acacias and palms sat Madame de Rohan at work upon her embroidery frame one balmy afternoon about a week after the arrival of her son at Castel Brianza. Seated on the grass by the arbour door Azerole was reading aloud from the Italian poets, and Christophe, swinging in a hammock suspended from a tree near by, half dozed half listened to what in his opinion was a rather dry entertainment for holiday hours. At the side of the broad garden-path stood the hand-carriage which at monsieur the captain's suggestion had been procured at Turin for drawing the cripple about in the park and lanes.

Suddenly, at the sight of two figures advancing towards them from the terrace in front of the château, the boy became wide-awake. "Madame Héloise, here comes the Chevalier de Rohan, and—and, yes, it is Monsieur l'Abbé Têtu; and I wish," concluded the boy under his breath, "I wish some spirit—an evil one it must needs be—would whirl him away."

The abbé was talking earnestly, a persuasive smile on his thin lips, while the young man seemed to be responding with as much haughty impatience as was

seemly towards one who was so much his elder. But, as his glance fell upon the party at the summer-house, de Rohan's face cleared. The abbé's, on the other hand, darkened with a scowl on becoming aware of the presence of the very person he had been trying to convince his young relative was a most undesirable as well as dangerous inmate of Madame his mother's house.

On Christophe's announcing the arrival of the gentlemen, Azerole had risen to leave; but at that instant Madame de Rohan by a hurried movement overturned her work-basket, and the governess had perforce to spring to her assistance.

Christophe, usually overawed in the presence of the dreaded abbé, felt with considerable satisfaction that he might shelter himself under the wing of the chevalier this afternoon. The young officer had stopped beside the hammock, and, taking from the wide pocket of his embroidered doublet a rather bulky volume, put it into the boy's hands. "There, little man, I was on my way to bring you this when Monsieur l'Abbé rode up. It is a copy of La Fontaine's Fables. It has just arrived with my heavy baggage from Paris."

The child clapped his hands with delight. "Fontaine's Fables! Voilà! but that is indeed good! Mademoiselle knows several of them. How glad we shall be to have them all! Ah, Monsieur Gaston," he added, as he affectionately clasped the hand so big and strong that rested on the edge of the hammock, "truly I wish that you were my brother!"

"Wherefore, petit?" asked the other, amused.

"Because then I might call you 'Gaston,' and, were you my brother, you would help me to be a big man and walk."

"Eh bien, then let us be brothers I say. I want a little brother and you want a big one, and here we are ready made each for the other." And, stooping, he bestowed a kiss in pledge of brotherhood on the blue-veined forehead of the cripple.

Christophe's face flushed crimson with pleasure. "Oh, I thank you, I thank you! And you must let me tell Azerole — you know she has given me leave to call her so. She will be glad that we are to be brothers, you and I, Gaston, for my mademoiselle she likes you too. When I asked her she told me so."

The child's clear ringing voice reached further than he knew. A burning blush suffused the cheeks of his embarrassed governess. Glancing apprehensively, first at the scowling abbé and then at the chevalier, she caught a twinkle of amusement in de Rohan's eyes as for an instant they met hers. Quickly averting her own she was startled to meet the look on Madame's face. Was she displeased, or was she ill, that she looked so pale? "Are you feeling faint, Madame. Shall I——?"

"It is nothing," hurriedly interrupted Madame de Rohan. "The heat—surely it has become oppressive this afternoon. Thank you, mademoiselle," as the girl, standing so as to shield her from the observation of the gentlemen, fanned her vigorously; "I thank you. That is refreshing. There, the faintness has passed."

Turning his back upon the hated heretic maiden, the abbé, speaking so that she might hear, said to the captain, "By the way, my valiant cousin, I hope that you can confirm the good news that has reached us in the provinces to the effect that his Most Catholic Majesty is hastening forward the holy work of exterminating that accursed Huguenot heresy out of France?"

De Rohan's countenance was a study. By a curious relaxation of the muscles he contrived to throw into his face an expression of indifference that bordered on stupidity. "Ma foi, Monsieur l'Abbé, but you have come to the wrong quarter for ecclesiastical intelligence! How could you expect a roving soldier of fortune to give you the last chapter of modern church history? My brains have no taste for that branch of study."

"But, my dear cousin, as a true believer in the faith, you——"

"The faith? Ah, what then is *the* faith?" ejaculated de Rohan. "Would that a voice from Heaven, speaking, that is to say, within the dull comprehension of an unscholarly captain, would but answer so that he might hear and believe! But there be many voices in these days, and all speak at once; little wonder if we simple fellows are deafened. There is Buddha, there is Mahomet, there is Confucius, there is Jehovah, there is Christ. Voilà! the bewildering voices! Then there are the subdivisions of the religious phalanx—Catholics, Lutherans, Huguenots, Jesuits, Jansenists—who are they? What are they? Which speaks the

truth? one or none? Certes, but it is not his most pious Majesty's subordinate officers who can tell!"

The abbé drew in his lips and bent his black brows upon his young relative in silence. He was vaguely, irritably conscious that the chevalier had been throwing dust in his eyes in such a fashion that even his keen-sightedness could not penetrate the cloud it had raised. As for Madame de Rohan she gazed at her son in mingled perplexity and alarm, her mental vision blinded by a mother's anxiety, seeing even less than did the abbé's, inasmuch that she mistook the dust for gunpowder in the air.

"Is his Most Catholic Majesty's army composed of infidels or merely of fools, may I ask?" demanded the abbé at length.

De Rohan gazed meditatively at the fingers of his right hand, which he was slowly moving up and down the hilt of his sword. "Infidels?" he repeated musingly. "Some of us, I believe, are philosophers. We hold with our countrymen that 'We think and therefore we exist . . . we can think of infinity and perfection; such ideas cannot exist from ourselves, but must have been imparted to us by a perfect and infinite Being, that Being we call God, therefore there must be a God'—Voilà, Monsieur l'Abbé, the creed of the philosophers. Unfortunately the name of their master has for the moment escaped me." A slight sound caused Gaston to glance towards Azerole, whose lips had parted involuntarily. "Is it possible that mademoiselle can come to my rescue?"

Blushing crimson, for she felt the steel-grey eyes

of the Abbé Têtu fixed upon her, Azerole hurriedly murmured, "I have heard my father quote words like to these. He told me they were those of a French philosopher named Descartes."

"Descartes! To be sure," cried de Rohan. "I thank you, mademoiselle," and he bowed with a smile different from the one he had bestowed upon the abbé.

A moment or two later and Azerole made her escape from the arbour. "What does it all mean?" she wondered, while she slowly ascended the flower-terraced garden on her way to the château. "I had taken for granted that he was a bigoted Papist. Is it better or worse that he should be nothing at all? But is he then naught but an unbeliever?" She could not answer the question satisfactorily to herself. After all, she soliloquised, it was no concern of hers what M. de Rohan's creed was, except so far as it affected her own, which she thankfully reflected seemed not likely to suffer molestation at his hands.

Truly, as she had told herself, what M. de Rohan believed or did not believe was no affair of hers, yet with an interest she could not account for she puzzled over the matter throughout the ensuing weeks. At Castel Brianza the season was a gay one. Visitors came and went, and for their entertainment chamois and boar hunts, tennis tournaments and musical soirées were got up. The captain was the life of the festivities, and was immensely popular, yet there were times when a keen observer might have detected signs indicating that he was bored with this

ceaseless round of so-called pleasure. Truth to tell, he kept it up, not for his own sake, but for his mother's. Satiated with the hollow pastimes of Parisian society, he would thankfully have welcomed a season of quiet in the country. But he believed his mother was suffering both in health and spirits from an over-abundance of that very solitude which he craved for himself, and he cheerfully sacrificed his own wishes to what he imagined was her good.

In those days Madame Héloise seemed to renew her youth, and she mixed in the gay crowd as one indeed born to it, apparently enjoying all with the keenness of one who has for years been starved. It was some time before it dawned even upon the sharp-sighted Azerole that Madame's brilliant flow of spirits was often forced, and that, while the smile was actually on her lips, there lurked in her eyes the old shadow of unrest.

Azerole and Christophe lived apart from this whirl of fêtes and entertainments. It is true that occasionally a visitor would arrive at the château who was not above noticing with kindly courtesy the governess of their hostess's cripple ward, and who did not seem to have been taught that heretics, more especially Vaudois, were the offscouring of the earth. But for the most part Azerole, although grateful for the friendly overtures of these few, kept herself strictly in the background, with the instinctive feeling that she was safer there. And in her capacity of governess to the little Monsieur de Beaurégard, she could easily manage this, the more easily indeed that it seemed actually to be a relief to

Madame Héloise when the boy was out of everybody's sight, her own included. Long happy days Azerole and her charge spent together in the woods that summer, finding the time pass quickly enough in studying, reading, and hunting for wild flowers and fruits. The even sameness of their life was saved from monotony by frequent visits to Malanot. These were red-letter days to both when Léon came over to fetch them to spend the day at the farm. True, it was a long way for the little invalid to ride, but Léon drew him so skilfully along the rough roads that the pleasure much more than outweighted the sense of fatigue. Azerole also was free to enjoy these expeditions with unalloyed delight, for Michel Roussier, who was not likely to forget in a hurry his introduction to Monsieur the captain, and who had no mind to risk a second meeting, had after all betaken himself to Turin.

On more than one occasion the party at the farm was enlightened by the company of Gaston de Rohan. The latter, it appeared, had not been many days at Castel Brianza before he had sought out his mother's old friends, and he had taken Madame Justine's heart by storm by assuring her that the memory of Malanot had remained in his mind throughout all the years of his absence from Piedmont. In all good faith we sometimes confound our recollections with our imagination; but be that as it may, the young officer's honest assertion highly gratified the worthy farmer and his wife. They were no less glad to see Gaston than he was to renew his childhood's friendship with them; and,

before long, de Rohan was ready to declare that, when other people ruffled his temper, he had only to betake himself to the farm to be petted into amiability again.

Moreover, he had discovered at the homestead an attraction which it certainly had not possessed in his childish days, and this new interest was Léon Montoux. Far from despising the Vaudois as a heretic barbet, Captain de Rohan seemed to consider the lad's trying position as but an additional cause for befriending him. Notwithstanding the fact that in age the young men were unequal, that in station and creed they were widely different, that their careers lay far apart, there was more in common between the two than appeared on the surface. De Rohan was quick to discover that the pastor's son was well educated, well mannered, with a spirit of manly independence underneath his habit of reserve; and it roused the elder man's admiration to see the quiet courage with which the lad dignified the subordinate place he occupied among those who in many respects were his inferiors.

A stray word at their first meeting having betrayed the fact that Montoux shared de Rohan's passion for botanising, the captain, whenever he could escape from the guests at the château, would ride over to Malanot, calmly demand from M. Broussel the loan of his young secretary, and set off with Léon for long hours together specimen hunting on the hills or in the depths of the forests. In the course of their rambles the two became confidential, and long before there had dawned more upon Azerole than that Monsieur de Rohan was not

the bigoted Papist she had imagined him to be, Léon —as none other had yet done—had begun to understand and sympathise with the confusion of mind into which de Rohan's religious beliefs, or rather his unbeliefs, had thrown him.

CHAPTER X

IN THE SALON

"WHO is that distinguished-looking girl with the beautiful brown eyes over yonder, cara mia?" asked the Signora Corbinelli.

The Comtesse de Villeroi followed her friend's gaze towards a window-recess in the salon at Castel Brianza, where a number of guests were assembled for a musical soirée, one evening towards the end of September. "Ah! that young person!" she replied indifferently. "That is the cripple de Beaurégard's governess. Our eccentric hostess elects to make a protégée of the girl, and consequently the creature is lifted altogether out of her place. It were better taste, in my opinion, to keep persons of that description in the background. What folly to dress up a heretic barbette as a court demoiselle!" and the comtesse, half enviously, half impatiently, turned away her head so that she could no longer see the objectionable person in question.

Undoubtedly the governess was well dressed that evening. Her slight, graceful figure was shown to advantage in a gown whose chief charm was its extreme simplicity, a fact which the showy comtesse failed to perceive. The dress was of a fine silky stuff, the colour a dark blue relieved by a dash of silver-grey, with soft

puffings of lace at neck and sleeves. Her only adornment was a spray of crimson flowers which Christophe had fastened among the glossy braids of her hair.

A light touch on the comtesse's shoulder caused her a momentary embarrassment. "Ah, my dear Héloise," she exclaimed, trying to cover her confusion with a light laugh, "I infer from the gravity of your countenance that you have arrived in time to hear my criticisms upon you and your protégée. But, mon amie, you must admit it were more prudent in these days of ours to keep such a doubtful favourite out of sight?"

"Because she is a somewhat pretty thing for older and plainer people to have a look at, eh, comtesse?"

Her hostess's smile seemed to have an irritating effect upon Madame de Villeroi, who was a faded beauty of middle age. "At least, considering her parentage," she returned aggressively, "surely something plainer in the way of attire would have been more becoming in the circumstances."

The flash in Madame de Rohan's eyes made the comtesse regret, all too late, having acted the mentor to the haughty lady of Brianza. "Mademoiselle Montoux's parentage, as it happens, is the same as your own, Berthe. Her grandfather, like yours, was a Huguenot seigneur of France. I do not observe that *you* study to buy cheap gowns out of respect to the memory of your ancestors!"

Madame la Comtesse shrugged her shoulders with an expression of annoyance, for she could see the Signora Corbinelli was all attention. "Ma foi, Héloise! is it then so long since you have quitted France that you

are not aware how that, under the new régime—Madame Scarron's, that is—it is no longer fashionable for the old Huguenot noblesse to worship the shades of their ancestors? Certes! their very shadiness forbids the *culte*. Such personages—as to creed, I mean," the comtesse lowered her voice significantly, "are best forgotten, ma chère Héloise."

There was a spiteful intonation in the last words, but Madame de Rohan merely bowed coldly, and, turning away, linked her arm in that of her son, who at that moment approached the group.

"Madra mia," he said, when, with elaborate politeness, he had saluted the other two ladies, "Monsieur de Baume tells me you promised him a rare musical treat this evening. We are all awaiting with impatience the surprise you have in store for us."

"It is in fulfilment of my promise that I requested Mademoiselle Montoux to join us this evening, in order that she might give us the pleasure of hearing her sing one of the old Provençal ballads, with which the Baron used to be familiar in olden days. My son, will you now beg mademoiselle to do us this favour."

It was with some surprise in his face, for he had never yet heard Azerole sing, that Captain de Rohan advanced to the recess, and, giving the young Vaudoise his hand, conducted her to a slightly raised daïs at the upper end of the salon. "Mademoiselle Montoux has kindly consented to sing to us one of the ancient songs of Provence, mesdames and messieurs," he informed the company in a voice that called for silence.

The announcement was received with elaborate ex-

pressions of formal courtesy, but in not a few cases the politeness veiled a half-mocking, half-impatient smile of contempt for their hostess's incomprehensible infatuation for her heretic protégée.

Tremblingly the girl took her stand in front of a tall marble statue, against which she leant for an instant to steady herself. It was not that the thought of singing made her nervous, she knew her voice would not fail her; but the scorn on the faces by which she was surrounded had not escaped her notice. She had no sooner begun to sing, however, than a sudden change came over the company. The low hum of talk was hushed into a breathless silence, the card-players forgot their game, all turned their gaze towards the modest figure who stood with hands lightly clasped and downcast eyes, forgetful of everything now save her music and the desire to give pleasure to Madame and her blind friend, the old Baron de Baume. When the song was ended eager thanks and exclamations of delight burst from the audience. "Bravo! What a marvellous voice! Mademoiselle ought to be a public singer." But the compliments of the crowd were as nothing to Azerole in comparison to Madame's smile, and the look which accompanied Gaston de Rohan's low-spoken thanks.

Feeling for the singer's hand the blind Baron clasped it in both of his. "I thank you, my child. It is beautiful as a dream. It must be, my dear, that you are Provençal. Is it not so?"

Azerole hesitated. Was it necessary to own the truth and brand herself with the discreditable name of

Vaudoise? Had not Madame again and again warned her that the fact had best not be proclaimed? M. de Baume would no longer care for the singing if he knew the singer was a heretic barbette. "My grandfather was Provençal, monsieur," she said.

But now from all sides there came eager requests for another song. Divining the taste of her audience, Azerole chose this time a stirring *chanson* of Bertran de Born's of troubadour fame, a rousing piece which gave full scope to the power and compass of her voice. Carried away by the wild spirit both of words and music, excited by the very evident appreciation of the listeners, Azerole failed to notice a slight movement behind her where the curtains of a side entrance to the salon had been noiselessly drawn back. When she had finished, the chorus of deep-toned "Bravos!" almost startled her, and she was about to descend from the daïs when de Rohan came forward. "Mademoiselle, do you happen to know another of de Born's odes, 'Bien me sourit le doux printemps'?" She smilingly bowed assent, and he lifted his violin from its case. "Ah, then permit me, mademoiselle, to have the pleasure of accompanying you," he eagerly petitioned. Blushing with pleasure she waited in a shy silence while he tuned his instrument, with a deliberation that enabled him in the meantime to take critical and admiring note of the girlish figure in blue and grey with the crimson flowers in her hair and the still more lovely carnation in her cheeks.

Absorbed in thought, Azerole was unconscious of his gaze. Above the sound of his voice, above the tumult

of applause, another voice, that of conscience, had been trying to make itself heard. As it happened, that same war-song of de Born's had been set to altogether different words by Madame Montoux, herself something of a poet; and this new version which Azerole had been accustomed to sing was not the troubadour's savage shout over his fallen foes, but the call to arms of the church militant, sounding out their triumphant songs of praise as they beat down the enemies of their Lord and His Christ. "If you sing your mother's translation," whispered conscience, "you will be singing for your Lord and Master, and the words may bring a message to some poor soul here." But another voice was ready with the quick reply, "They would not listen. They would call it a heretic's song. At the least they would laugh it to scorn as a parody upon de Born's poem. And certainly the words of the troubadour will do far greater justice to my voice."

The third song was even a more brilliant success than the two which had preceded it; but there was one of the audience who had heard not a word. That one was Madame de Rohan. A figure which some little time before had taken up a position just within the curtained doorway had attracted her attention, making her uneasy she knew not why. But for a few moments she was completely puzzled, for the new-comer stood in the shadow. Presently, however, the head was pressed forward, and, at the sight of that dark face with its evil gaze fixed upon the young Vaudoise, Madame Héloise started. The Abbé Têtu's thin lips were smiling, with an expression of cunning triumph, while with his keenly

alert ears he followed every one of the clear sweet notes as they floated through the vast room, now hushed to a breathless silence. When the prolonged applause at the end of the song had subsided, the priest receded once more within the shade of the curtains.

"You are a lover of music, Monsieur l'Abbé?" remarked a young lady near by who had observed his absorbed attention.

"Not a lover, signorina, but a judge if you will. I have the privilege to hold the sacred office of Father Confessor to the demoiselles of St. Cyr, and my services in matters concerning that remarkable institution are commanded from time to time by its guardian-angel——"

"Madame the King's wife you mean, Monsieur l'Abbé," interposed his fair questioner with a short laugh.

The abbé bowed. "Madame de Maintenon knows the profound interest I take in that institution, of which she is the noble founder and patron; and, unworthy though I be of such an honour, she condescends to entrust to me the task of selecting the lady-preceptors, musical and otherwise."

"That school is becoming quite a hobby of Madame's," struck in the Comtesse de Villeroi, who had joined the group about the abbé. Alphonse Têtu, one of the favourite preachers of the Chapel Royal, was for the time being popular with the ladies. "Have you heard the last story of St. Cyr, Monsieur l'Abbé?" The ecclesiastic's bow signified a readiness to be entertained. "Madame de Maintenon's cousin,

as without doubt you are aware, is an obstinate Huguenot, and actually refused to have his children educated in the true faith. But Madame was a match for him. He was ordered off on a cruise. He returned to find his little daughter safely immured at St. Cyr, and—such is the supernatural authority of the place—already a devout Catholic. The child—she was nine years old—had been bribed on the one hand with daily surfeits of music, of which she was fond, and on the other with starvation rations in the shape of whippings, for which she had a distaste, and thus her conversion became a success as easy as it was beautiful. Unfortunately the beauty of the affair did not strike Monsieur, the father of the petite, but, ma foi! what remained to be said when the kidnapper was Madame the King's wife?"

"I have always understood that the education at St. Cyr was of the very highest, but I did not know that the art of music was a speciality with Madame," yawned the young lady, who was beginning to weary of the subject.

"Such a speciality, signorina, that Madame de Maintenon will have none to instruct her demoiselles but a teacher possessed of an exceptionally fine voice, a fair face, and a marked refinement in manners."

Following the direction of the speaker's glance, Madame la Comtesse's reply had a touch of spitefulness in it. "I presume, Monsieur l'Abbé, you are thinking that the barbette nightingale answers exactly to that description?"

Annoyed at the speaker's intolerable sharpness of

perception Alphonse Têtu swiftly withdrew his gaze, to find still further to his chagrin that not far off, possibly within hearing of the conversation, stood Madame de Rohan.

A few minutes later Madame Héloise approached Azerole, who was listening to de Rohan while he discoursed to her upon the respective merits of the old ballad-music of France and Spain. In a voice so distinct that all might have heard, and so cold that it sounded almost harsh, Madame de Rohan said, "Thank you, mademoiselle. You have done your best to oblige us by singing for our entertainment, but now I am sure you must needs be fatigued. Moreover, Monsieur de Beaurégard, were he to awake, will look for his mademoiselle to be by him. And," but this last was spoken so low that Azerole, who had drawn back proudly erect, did not catch it, "*and*, child, the Abbé Têtu has arrived."

Thus Azerole Montoux was dismissed from the salon, the girl's chest heaving with a sense of hurt pride. For a moment she stood motionless and alone, for Madame de Rohan had moved away and was mingling with the crowd of guests at the other end of the room. It was hard to be thus publicly reminded that she was but a poor dependant, one of the heretic pariahs of society. What right had any one to treat her as such? Nay, had not Madame herself told her to remember at all times that she was a de Montélimart? And had she not this very evening been the centre of admiration, and deservedly so? She looked for Gaston de Rohan with a vague belief that

he would not stand by and see her humiliated; but he, more astute on this occasion than she, had recognised his mother's tone to be that of an actor, and, scenting danger in the air for the young Vaudoise, had promptly taken the timely warning. He was now talking with great animation to a lady resplendent in velvet and diamonds, who to all appearance was captivating him with her smiles. Azerole swiftly turned away, and slipped unobserved from the salon.

On reaching her own room she flung herself into a chair, and her over-wrought nerves relieved themselves in a burst of tears. For the moment she had forgotten Christophe. Disturbed by her entrance he awoke with a frightened cry, and Azerole, rising hastily, approached his cot, and stooping over him soothingly spoke his name.

The child, but half awake, and dazzled by the light of the candle she held, looked at her sleepily. "Is it my mademoiselle? I thought perchance it had been an angel," he murmured, and turning, dropped asleep again.

"An angel!" Alas, how far from the truth! and sinking down once more in the low chair she buried her face in her hands. The boy's innocent words had made her realise with sudden shame that it had been her worse not her better self that had acted a part that evening in the salon. "What would my own dear mother think of her little Azerole now?" she asked bitterly, while with the stern judgment of youth she condemned herself. "It all began with that look in the mirror in Madame's room," she murmured

penitently. "It takes so little to make me vain as a peacock. It was just the same when I was a child and went to stay for a little while at Montélimart in France with my mother's cousin Mdlle. Cécile. I liked people to praise my dark eyes and my fine voice, and I quite believed the old Count who kissed my hand and told me that when I sang I looked like a little angel. Then, when I came back to the old presbytère, hélas! it seemed so small and poor! And, when I told mother all about my gay life at Montélimart, I thought her hard when she said, 'Ah, my little Azerole, dost thou not know that it is not the beautiful face, nor the beautiful clothes, nor the beautiful voice that makes the angel, but it is the beautiful heart?'"

The tears were dropping fast through the girl's fingers. "I went down to the salon this evening without asking the God of the Vaudois to keep me strong and brave for the right, and now—! ah, the mean littleness of it all! I had the opportunity to sing for the truth but I thrust it away; and worse, far worse, I felt ashamed to own myself a Vaudoise!"

It was long before Azerole Montoux thought of going to bed that night. But at last comfort came to her. "Although mother knew how vain and wrong her Azerole ofttimes was, she was ever loving and forgiving. And will not our Father God, for Christ's sake, be the same although He knows all?"

CHAPTER XI

MILTON *VERSUS* DANTE

The soirée at which Azerole Montoux sang her Provençal ballads was a farewell entertainment to the visitors who were leaving Castel Brianza the following week. The captain had begged that no more guests should be invited to the château. "For the remainder of my stay I want to have you to myself, madre mia," he had said to his mother. And he spoke the truth, for not even to himself would Gaston de Rohan have confessed that his chief longing to be rid of the restraint of strangers was prompted by a desire to see and know more of Christophe's mademoiselle.

In the afternoon of the day on which the last of the guests had departed, de Rohan sauntered through the park towards a plantation of trees beyond in search of Monsieur de Beaurégard and his governess, who, he had been told, were in the woods. It was not long before he spied the pair, Christophe swinging lazily in his hammock, and Azerole seated on a mossy knoll under the shade of a wide-spreading walnut tree, her bonnet on the ground by her side, her fingers busy with her lace-pillow, on which she was making a collarette to be given to Madame on her birthday.

The cripple's voice reached Gaston, who had paused

to look at the picture in the autumn-tinted glade, and the querulous tone showed Monsieur de Beaurégard's temper to be what Jacqueline would have called "woven in the cross-grain." "I will not read any more of my fables to you, Mademoiselle Azerole Montoux. I am much fatigued. Nay, more, it is your turn to amuse *me*. Lay down your work, will not you, and sing to me? Your lace must needs have grown a league in length."

With a laugh Azerole obeyed. Putting aside her pillow she sang him one of his favourite songs, a quaint *barcarolle* full of curious trills and flourishes which were the child's delight. Knowing his taste in that line Azerole merrily improvised a number of spirited shakes and quavers not to be found in the original composition.

"Bravo!" shouted Christophe, clapping his hands as the singer, after a rush of silvery ripples, ended in a peal of laughter at her own performance. "Bravo! it seems just as if the nightingales had come back for a good-bye concert, and had all gone crazy in the middle. Bravo!"

"And now," said his governess, resuming her work, "if you will read aloud the fable of 'The Grasshopper and the Ant,' you will find, Monsieur de Beaurégard, that the moral of all this is that, if I sing all the autumn, vraiment, I shall be hungry all the winter."

Christophe laughed derisively, then, book in hand, looked earnestly at Azerole. "I have been cross-tempered many times this day, yet you have not scolded me once, Azerole. Jacqueline would have."

Rising, the girl went to him, and softly laid her

cheek against his. "Comment?" she said, half tenderly, half lightly, "know you not then that little Christophes, who cannot run about and play like other boys, and yet for the most part are wondrous good and patient, do not deserve a scolding except perchance once in three years?"

Christophe laughed again, and, his good-humour now completely restored, he was about to read, when the trees which enclosed the mossy glade where the two had established themselves were pushed aside, and Monsieur de Rohan appeared with a grave apology for his intrusion, and an appeal to be allowed to remain for a little while. "I am sure to be cross-tempered if you send me away, whereas were I to stay, you would see that I could prove both useful and ornamental," he pleaded. And taking the book from Christophe, he fulfilled his promise by reading aloud with inimitable spirit several of La Fontaine's humorous word-pictures.

"Bravo, Gaston! Your reading is well-nigh as good as Azerole's singing," cried Christophe.

The girl laughed at the boy's frank compliments; but the bright colour in her cheeks told that her appreciation had been no less than his.

"I hear from Christophe that you and he are fond of reading, mademoiselle," said the young man, closing the book at last. "We must have more poetry-and-prose afternoons, now that we are alone at the château. May I ask, mademoiselle, whether you know Dante's incomparable 'Vision'?"

Fearing his disapproval if she spoke the truth she hesitated; the next she answered, low but firmly,

"Monsieur, I do not like the 'Divina Commedia,' the portions, that is, which I know. The imagery, the language, they are grandly beautiful, but the poet speaks not the truth." Gaston looked at her inquiringly. "Monsieur, he is not true to God, nor to the Bible. You will remember, monsieur, that I am a Vaudoise. The Vaudois do not love what contradicts the Holy Scriptures."

She half expected to hear his scornful laugh, or to see him turn away in displeasure at her presumption; but by way of answer he repeated from memory one or two of his favourite cantos from the Paradiso. "Mademoiselle," he said after a pause, somewhat disappointed with Azerole's unresponsiveness, "you followed the Italian, did you not?"

She smiled. "Oh yes, monsieur. To us Vaudois Italian is as familiar as French. I enjoyed the poetry and your repeating of it, but—" she stammered and hesitated, feeling uncomfortably that something more was expected of her, and distressed to seem uncourteous.

"Nevertheless you do not like the poem?"

She shook her head. "Monsieur de Rohan, were I to believe Dante's Paradiso to be true, I should not want to go to heaven. In the heaven of the Holy Scriptures there is no queen save the bride, the Lamb's wife, she who is the true Church of God. Dante sees in his Paradiso the 'Lovely One,' who is Mary of Nazareth. In the Father's house there is indeed One who is 'altogether lovely.' He is our Beloved, and we are His, and we love the thought of going to heaven, because there we shall be with Christ, which is far

better. I should feel utterly lost and lonely among Dante's crowd of strangers, if I could not see my Saviour save from a far distance as one of the three glorious, mysterious orbs of light. Ah, if that were so, heaven would not seem Home to me!"

The young girl's voice trembled with passionate feeling, but now, overwhelmed with sudden confusion as she caught de Rohan's gaze fixed upon her, she blushed and stopped. "Pardon me, monsieur. I was forgetting myself to speak so boldly."

The captain bowed. "There is nothing to apologise for, mademoiselle," he said, and, apparently interested in the subject, he led her on still further to explain her views regarding the future life. "It is beautiful but strange your fancy about death, mademoiselle," he finally remarked, "a mere stepping from a lower room to a higher, and at once the child is at Home in the Father's house, no purgatorial fires barring the way. Such a belief, methinks, would remove all cause for fear, or even for regret because of the shortness of life. According to your remarkable creed a life cut off in its prime enters, even in the very act of death, into fulness of life."

His light tone jarred upon Azerole; but, when she glanced gravely at him, she caught a look that made her wonder whether his would-be carelessness was but assumed to hide a deeper feeling. For a few moments he sat in silence absently watching the pretty play of her fingers among the flying bobbins. At length he roused himself. "Mademoiselle," he said, speaking in an undertone lest Christophe, deep once more in his beloved La Fontaine, might overhear, "I believe my

mother's library contains a book which would be entirely to your taste. It is called 'A Dialogue between Pope Julius II., a familiar Spirit, and Peter at the Door of Heaven.' The piece, a clever satire exposing the abuses of the Papacy, afforded much amusement in France a hundred years ago, when it was actually tolerated on the stage. The name of the writer never transpired, but it was popularly believed to have been from the pen of Erasmus."

"Erasmus!" The word was a mere exclamation of scorn, and Azerole's lips curled as she spoke it.

Gaston was amused, no less than surprised. "Comment, mademoiselle! Was not Erasmus the greatest, inasmuch as he was the first of the Reformers? Certes, he paved the way for Martin Luther, the hero of your Protestantism."

"Yes," she returned, a fine scorn still in her voice. "It was true what the monks said of Erasmus—'He laid the egg that Luther hatched.' And they might have added that if the hatching had depended upon Erasmus, the Reformation would never have seen the light of day. A friend of my father's in Germany sent him a copy of some of Erasmus's letters. All of them were clever, some were grand, even noble, but not a few were what the German professor called masterpieces of the sublimely contemptible. It was so evident from these letters that Erasmus stood aloof from Luther, not because he did not agree with him, but because he feared for himself and the Church to which he clung, the bursting of the storm he felt sure would follow, if Martin Luther persisted in fighting to the death against error."

"But Erasmus, in the very letters to which you refer, deplored these same errors as much as did Luther. If any man upheld freedom of thought, if any man advocated the purification of the Church, if any man wrote in defence of the truth, it was Desiderius Erasmus, mademoiselle."

"Unfortunately your reformer, monsieur, loved Desiderius Erasmus more even than the triumph of the truth. He wrote to a friend that, although he knew reforms were needed, he would rather see things left as they were than that there should be a revolution leading to one knew not what. Others might be martyrs if they liked. For his part, if trouble came, he feared he should do like Peter. And so to the last he refused to read Luther's writings. He seemed to be afraid that he might in honesty be obliged to approve of them, and that his approval might bring him into danger."

"Are you not somewhat hard upon the poor man?" asked Gaston, still amused at her vehemence.

Azerole blushed. "Pardon me, monsieur. I am remembering my father's indignation when he read aloud those letters of Erasmus to my mother. But I ought also to remember how he said, 'Poor Erasmus! He was a great man, and with a grain or two more of unselfishness he would have been a hero.' He said, too, that he believed Erasmus' life would not have been to himself the miserable disappointment it was throughout had he but had the courage to risk his comforts, his fame, ay, even his life, in taking his stand by Luther's side in the forefront of the battle."

"I say again, mademoiselle, are you not hard on Erasmus? After all, a man living in dangerous times has need to be prudent. I, too, am for liberty of conscience in religion. I hold with Erasmus that no man should be persecuted for his opinions. But, in declining to rush into the arena of Church politics merely to lose his life through provoking a battle of words, Erasmus was simply exercising towards himself the mercy and consideration he was at the very time thus eloquently claiming for his fellow-men."

"Pardon me, monsieur, but it was not a question, methinks, of rushing into the arena or keeping out of it," protested Azerole. "To Christ's soldiers had come, then as now, the call to arms. The enemy was in the field. The fight had already begun. Erasmus was there, whether he willed it or no. But he refused either to carry the colours or to wear the uniform of his Captain. I warrant, Monsieur de Rohan, that is not the way the knights of France are wont to war against the enemy in the field."

"I see, mademoiselle, you hold that in no circumstances is prudence the better part of valour," laughed the captain; but the laugh, even to himself, sounded a little forced.

The next day was wild and stormy, a rough reminder that summer had gone and that winter was already on its way. Outside the October wind blew in angry gusts, driving the rain in swirls about the gardens, beating tempestuously against the windows of the château, and drenching with sudden shower-baths the statues in the court. But within doors all was warmth

and comfort at Castel Brianza. A great fire burned in the hall, Christophe's couch was drawn up to the cheery blaze, and close by sat Madame de Rohan and Azerole at work and expectant.

The trio had not been waiting many minutes when they were joined by de Rohan. "Mesdames and monsieur," he said, a mixture of grave and gay in his tone, "seeing that our planet earth presents but few attractions to us this afternoon, I propose that we, all four of us, should straightway set forth on a journey to Paradiso. Nay, mademoiselle, have no fear" —this to Azerole, who had glanced up apprehensively. "On this occasion our guide will not be Dante Alighieri. Comment, Monsieur de Beaurégard, you too!" he exclaimed, shaking his head reprovingly at Christophe, whose forehead was puckered with a frown of disapproval at sight of the bulky roll of manuscript under the captain's arm. "You look ugly and wicked enough for—for—eh bien, for one of Commander-in-chief Lucifer's volunteer artillerymen."

On the instant Christophe was all attention. "Ho, ho!" he cried, "is it bad men fighting against good men?" Gaston nodded. "And are the bad ones properly punished to death?" asked the cripple. To this also the captain assented cheerfully. "Then I shall like to listen." And the boy, carefully slipping his book of fables under his pillow, prepared, with bloodthirsty anticipation, to enjoy himself.

Dragging forward one of the heavy carved chairs within the charmed circle about the fire, de Rohan sat down and unrolled his manuscript. "Madre mia,"

he began, addressing his mother, but his gaze the while furtively directed towards the still figure on the opposite side of the hearth. Her head was bent over her lace-pillow, and out and in among her wavy brown hair the fire-light diligently wove threads of gold. "I told you that last year, how, when our regiment was in the Low Countries, I was laid down with fever for nigh upon eight weeks in Rotterdam. Eh bien, in the house where I lodged there was an English refugee, one of England's *noblesse* in more senses than one. I shall never forget his kindness to me. He was one of the truly good and truly happy, and yet he had sacrificed his all—his fortune, his family, his life—for he was slowly dying—all for the sake of what he called the truth. It was as well, perchance, that these weeks came to an end at last, for Sir Edward—he was a Protestant—would soon have made a heretic of me; and, certes, that would have been the spoiling of a good Papist." Madame de Rohan glanced at her son with a quick look of anxiety. His forced lightness of tone did not deceive her; she knew that underneath there was earnest in his words. With the abruptness of one who had been betrayed into saying more than he intended, the captain left the subject of creed and turned to another. "Sir Edward had been five years an exile in Holland, and to help to while away the time he had occupied himself in translating into French a book of poetry written by a countryman of his, one John Milton. When we parted he gave the manuscript to me. The piece is called 'Paradise Lost.' I have read but a few pages; but, truly, and if the rest

be like unto these few, I warrant we shall find the whole amazing fine reading."

De Rohan's expectations were more than fulfilled. "Paradise Lost" proved a great treat to his audience. The afternoons were looked forward to with impatience by the ladies, and their appreciation was proved by the fact that they oftener than not forgot to continue their work in the interest of listening. Even Christophe, raising himself on his elbow with his head leaning on his hand, would follow with delight the story of the great war in heaven, while ever and again Gaston, who was very mindful of the little fellow, would pause to explain some passage which was above the boy's comprehension. When the sixth book was reached, and Satan with his infernal machines bid fair to overthrow the hosts of God, Christophe covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud. The roar and thunder of those hellish legions were horribly vivid not only to the child's excited imagination but to those of his elders, and, when the tide of battle changed, and in fancy they saw God's angels tearing up the hills and mountains by the roots and hurling them upon the foe, Azerole, in the reaction from awed suspense to exultation, was ready to join in Christophe's shrill shout of triumph.

As often as might be, Léon Montoux added yet another to the group of Gaston's appreciative listeners; nor did the young Vaudois prove himself the least shrewd contributor to the discussions of the great epic which invariably followed the afternoon readings. Not unfrequently it happened that the talk was pro-

longed until the hour for the evening meal, whereupon de Rohan would exert his authority, not always unsuccessfully, to prevail upon his friend to remain to supper first and music afterwards. And thus the days passed pleasantly and swiftly on, and the time drew near for monsieur the captain's departure to rejoin his regiment, now under orders for the German frontier. The coming parting was in every one's mind, yet none, not even Christophe, seemed to care to speak of what was now becoming the uppermost thought with all. Throughout these last days Azerole appeared to be scarcely herself, moods of forced gaiety alternated with fits of strange silence, while into her eyes at times would come a hungry wistfulness like the pathetic look of a dumb animal in pain. As for Madame Héloise, she moved about the house incessantly occupied in seeing to her son's outfit, making arrangements for his future comfort, attending with scrupulous exactness to every detail of the business matters which she talked over with him and the lawyer from Turin; and although each day saw her grow more thin and worn-looking, her voice and manner were marked by the old impassiveness, which Azerole now knew told of an inward struggle to maintain an outward calm. And Christophe, determined to show himself the man he fain would be, shed his tears in secret, and talked less and less when Gaston was by.

One evening—it wanted but a few days to the one fixed for the captain's departure—the family party, of which Léon formed one, were gathered in Madame's boudoir. An attempt to drive away dull care by the

help of music had signally failed, and Léon, with a sudden inspiration, proposed that Gaston should read over again some of their favourite passages from "Paradise Lost." The suggestion was a happy one, and there was not one of the group but felt the better and the stronger for listening to words that carried their thoughts above themselves and earth's cares right up to their "Almighty Father" "the Omnipotent," in whose stupendous schemes of Creation and Redemption the plan of each one of their little lives had from all eternity had its place.

"I shall leave this with you, Léon," said de Rohan, proceeding to fold up the roll. "A roving soldier is no safe custodian of things valuable," and with a smile he handed the manuscript to his friend, who accepted the trust with a quick hand-clasp and flush of pleasure.

"Tiens!" Gaston exclaimed, observing that the cripple had watched this scene a little wistfully; "tiens," he repeated, slapping his velvet doublet now on one side now on the other, "that reminds me of a somewhat valuable curio which Madame my mother found to-day when she was overhauling my belongings. It is a relic connected with no less a personage than the great Condé." After a search the captain at length produced from the depths of one of his pockets a small packet. Opening it he held up what seemed a silver crown piece. "See here," he said, and by a skilful touch of his finger upon the edge of the supposed coin he adroitly opened it, disclosing the fact that it was counterfeit. "Hidden in this tiny box a written message was conveyed to the prisoner in the fortress of Vincennes from his friends

outside. Into the same secret receptacle the prince slipped his reply, then flung the make-believe coin across the moat, where it was picked up by a friend in waiting on the further side. Voilà, little man Christophe, I shall leave that with you as your keepsake. You will take better care of it than I should, I trow."

Apparently debating something with himself, the child held the little silver box in his hand for a moment in silence. "Gaston," he asked at length and doubtfully, "may people do what they please with a keepsake?" De Rohan nodded assent. "Ecco, if you will allow me, I shall give this to Michel Roussier." Without noticing the surprise both of Azerole and Léon, Christophe continued in what he considered a confidential aside, "Michel Roussier is a kind man. Twice he gave me a present of a pretty picture. He said it would perchance entertain me while Mademoiselle Montoux accompanied him for a walk in the woods. But, although I always remembered to give Azerole the message, she was never able to go with him, which was a pity, was it not? I felt sad for Michel Roussier, for he was vastly disappointed each time, and I have often wished that *I* might give *him* a present, something he would truly like. I asked Monsieur Broussel, and he told me his nephew Michel had a—a—ah, yes—a mouldering mania for ancient dilapidation-worthlessness. And this queer box, I vow, will be just exactly what would mightily please him for his museum of strange things. I thought at first I should like to keep it for myself, but you know *I* have La Fontaine for *my* keepsake."

"By all means give the coin as a solace to Monsieur Roussier," Captain de Rohan responded, with a heartiness that was truly surprising, considering the unfavourable opinion he had formed of the gentleman in question.

At that moment the clock struck nine, and, rising, Léon reluctantly announced that he must go. A silence fell upon the little company. There was an unwillingness to say farewell, which told that the thought of a longer parting was again casting its shadow over their spirits.

"Just one last song," pleaded Gaston. "Who knows but this may be our last opportunity," he urged, looking at Azerole, and there was that in his face which silenced the refusal which had risen to the lips she was finding it difficult to steady.

"Then let it be the 'Traveller's Psalm,'" said Léon, and, although he tried to say it cheerily, even his manly voice was a trifle husky, for the thought would press itself upon him how he would miss the friend who had been so much to him that summer.

Madame Héloise spoke never a word. She had drawn a little apart, and her face was shaded by her hand, so that only Christophe, who was nearest her, could see through the tears that dimmed his own eyes that hers were wet.

Hand in hand the brother and sister stood while they sang the familiar psalm, with which they had been wont to speed the parting guest in the old presbytère at Ponefrà—"I to the hills will lift mine eyes." Gaston de Rohan stood also, and was fain at last to bow his

head, moved, he could scarce have told why, by words and music that seemed to burn into his very soul. Little he guessed that the bright constellation of promises grouped together in the last verse was destined long afterwards to shine forth when, in his hour of darkest, sorest need, he was groping blindly for some standing ground on which to stay himself.

"The Lord shall keep thy soul; He shall
Preserve thee from all ill.
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will."

CHAPTER XII

CONFIDENCES

The following morning dawned a sombre grey, but later on the sun broke through the veil, and, apparently anxious to make amends for his previous unavoidable absence, shone with an ardour that made it impossible indoors or out to ignore his presence.

About three o'clock in the afternoon Gaston and Azerole were standing in the hall endeavouring by their united efforts to persuade Madame Héloise that the dampness which she insisted must still be in the air need not prevent Christophe from having a little outing in the sunshine. They had almost succeeded in gaining their point when the bustle of an arrival put a sudden end to the discussion, and in another minute a party of riders, dismounting from their horses in the court, were ushered by old Blaise into the hall. The foremost to enter was the Abbé Têtu, and with him was another priest, tall and worn, a pair of keen restless eyes lighting up a face that looked pallid in the full light of the sun. Azerole, though she had only seen him once before, recognised him at once—Ugon Rorenco, Prior of Lucerna. After saluting Madame de Rohan the abbé explained that he and his party had stopped

on their way to Pinerolo to take farewell of Monsieur his cousin.

"Azerole," whispered Christophe, raising himself on his elbow, "I wish you could have taken me away. He," pointing to the group at the further end of the hall, "he is always seeing me with his icicle-eyes. Look! yonder he stands watching us now. The prior is ugly too, but do you know, Azerole, when I stare at Monsieur l'Abbé a long time without moving my eyes from his face, he seems to be slowly, slowly turning into a serpent like the rest of the demons in Monsieur John de Milton, you remember? Ugh!" and Christophe, with a grimace of mingled fear and disgust, half averted his face.

Azerole had drawn as far as might be out of sight within the shadow of a curtain behind the couch, but now, glancing furtively across to where Monsieur l'Abbé stood, she saw that it was indeed at the little cripple he was gazing so fixedly. The ecclesiastic's brow was furrowed with a frown, and he had the air of a man in pursuit of some shadowy memory which to his annoyance always succeeded in eluding his grasp. Azerole suddenly stepped in front of her charge. "Lie down, Christophe," she said, a touch of unusual peremptoriness in her tone. The boy obeyed wonderingly, and at that moment the voice of Prior Ugon roused Monsieur l'Abbé from his momentary abstraction.

"Mayhap we are somewhat premature in our farewells," the prior was saying in his suave voice; "but, as our good brother Alphonse remarked, it were better to be too soon than too late in such a case. Our

ignorance of the exact date of M. de Rohan's departure——"

"The date of my departure is no secret, messieurs. It is fixed by General Boufflers for Friday, the 25th, the day after to-morrow," Gaston rejoined with easy politeness, addressing himself, however, to Alphonse Têtu rather than to the prior. "Without doubt Monsieur l'Abbé thinks to join our party, and is anxious naturally to obtain exact information."

With difficulty the abbé had suppressed a start. "My movements, cher cousin, are at all times so uncertain," he replied evasively.

"Without doubt we shall meet again ere long," indifferently rejoined the young man.

"You will be quartered for the winter in barracks on your return to France, monsieur, is it not so?" asked the prior with a further show of interest.

"No, Monsieur Rorenco. As it happens my regiment is ordered to the German frontier," and Gaston, bowing ceremoniously to Prior Ugon, saw, without seeming to see, that the eyes of the two priests had met in a meaning glance for an instant, then both had looked away.

After a little more talk the visitors, declining all offers of hospitality on the plea of lack of time, prepared to make their adieux. As Monsieur l'Abbé saluted Madame Héloise he remarked, with the half-absent air of a man who is obviously thinking at the moment of something else than the matter he has introduced, "In a letter which I had from my sister yesterday, Madame, there was a little piece of news which may

perchance interest you. You remember, I dare say, the Count of Mondovi? Eh bien, it appears he has met with another disappointment. The child is a girl. You knew, of course, that he had married again?"

If he had struck her Madame de Rohan could hardly have looked more startled. She staggered back, putting her hand out blindly to catch at some support. "Married again?" she repeated mechanically, staring fixedly at the Abbé Têtu.

The sight of her face, the sound of her voice drove away his momentary preoccupation; and now the priest remembered having heard years ago that it was expected the Count, "Mondovi the Black," as he was called, would marry for his second wife the beautiful widow of Major de Rohan. The half-amused smile that flickered for a moment on the ecclesiastic's thin lips was genuine, and was gone in a moment. Madame Héloise had both seen and understood it, however, and on the instant, relieved by that smile from a great terror, she had regained her self-possession. True, she was deathly pale, and her hand still clutched the back of the chair beside her, but she stood erect, and her voice was kept well under control.

"I had heard naught either of the Count's marriage or of the—the child. But I am glad if it be that his marriage has brought him happiness. Monsieur the Count always preferred to live in his country château, and it was dull for him with mademoiselle his daughter absent at the convent school."

"Mademoiselle de Mondovi is no longer at the

convent, but at the court, one of its most brilliant ornaments. You forget, Madame, she is no longer the child you remember."

"True, I was forgetting that, Monsieur l'Abbé," she rejoined, her voice now coldly indifferent. Turning from him, her manner distant and haughty, she made her adieux to the others of the party and retired to her boudoir, the door of which she closed behind her.

Gaston followed his visitors into the court, where the horses were waiting. After seeing them off he returned to the hall, and began gravely pacing up and down.

"Gaston," called Christophe, "will you be pleased to carry me into Madame Héloise's boudoir?"

The young man stopped short, looked at the cripple hesitatingly, then shook his head.

"Ah, you do not understand," persisted the boy, eagerly raising himself on his elbow. "Azerole understands. It was she who told me that, because Madame Héloise had no little son of her own, I ought to try to be instead of such to her, and I always do now. And, when she is fatigued and sad—she is thus even now, I saw it in her face—then without doubt she likes me to be her little son and comfort her. Eh bien, will you take me to her if you please, monsieur, now that you understand."

Gaston glanced inquiringly towards Azerole. She bowed her head in assent. Without a word de Rohan lifted the boy in his arms and carried him to the boudoir.

In another minute he had returned. "Mademoiselle Montoux," he said, approaching the window where she

stood gazing dreamily out into the court, "if you are at leisure at present, I should very much like to have a talk with you." She gave a ready if somewhat wondering assent. "The shelter of the woods will be charming, but you must be warmly clad, for the autumn air becomes somewhat chilly in the afternoons."

Stepping within a curtained recess he brought out a cloak of his mother's and wrapped it about her shoulders. She thanked him with a smile, blushing shyly the while and wholly unconscious of the pretty picture she made, her flushed face peeping out from the soft fur and crimson silk lining of the hood she had drawn over her head. Gaston, who took an unconscionably long minute to adjust the mantle to his satisfaction, had a full view of the picture, and it seemed to have a silencing effect upon him, for he strode along by her side to the very outskirts of the park without uttering a word. At first Azerole, who felt like one walking in a dreamy maze, missed nothing. Presently, however, she awoke to the realisation of the silence, and it began to oppress her uncomfortably.

"Monsieur," she ventured at last, "I think you said there was something you wanted to say to me."

Ay, truly there was more than one thing he wanted to say, but the something that was uppermost could not be said now. Resolutely driving it from him for the present, he brought his mind back to the matter about which he wished to consult her. They had now entered the plantations. De Rohan turned into a glade shadowed at the further end by the sombre foliage of a grove of ilex trees. Slowly, and still in silence

for a few minutes, the two paced up and down the narrow piece of level sward. Stopping short at length, de Rohan asked abruptly, "Mademoiselle Montoux, am I right in believing that you love my mother?" A tender little smile was her quick reply. "I thought as much," he murmured. "It is that which makes it possible for me to speak. I am in the strange position of having no one to whom I may unburden myself, and I feel, mademoiselle, that I can trust you." Speech came unreadily to Azerole, but he seemed to read her unspoken words, as she simply bowed her head.

"It is of Madame my mother I would speak," went on de Rohan in a troubled voice. "I feel sure she is not well in health; I saw it whenever I came, but of late the thought has come to me that there is something on my mother's mind, and it is that which is making her ill." He paused, but this time his companion gave no sign of response. He watched her, his keen eyes trying to read her face, which had grown as grave as his own. But it baffled him. All he knew was that she showed no token of surprise at what he had said. His second question was as abrupt as his first. "Has it ever occurred to you, mademoiselle, that there is any one who exercises some strange power over my mother, the power of making her afraid?"

Involuntarily she glanced cautiously around. "Monsieur l'Abbé Têtu," she replied at once and in a whisper. Then, as a scene of the past came back to her, she added, "and Jules Bersour."

"Monsieur my cousin Alphonse! I thought as much," he muttered. "Certes, it is scarcely to be

wondered at that Héloise de Rohan and Alphonse Têtu should not love one another, but that he should have it in his power to annoy her is a mystery I fail to fathom." For a minute he remained deep in thought, his brows knit, his mouth stern. Yet, when he next spoke, his tone was singularly gentle. "Mademoiselle, I am my mother's only protector, and I am obliged to leave her. I feel that you are her friend. I am going to ask you to watch over her for me while I am gone. May I take this liberty?"

Some strong feeling moved the girl almost to tears. "Monsieur," she said huskily, "I would do anything for Madame Héloise. She has been like a mother to me, and so far as I can I will be a daughter to her. Yes, truly you may trust me, monsieur."

He stopped, took her hand, and kissed it gravely. "I thank you, mademoiselle." She was in no way disconcerted. She knew it was merely a sealing of the confidence established between them.

There was another short interval of silence, while again the two paced up and down. Azerole was hurriedly debating a difficult question with herself — that strange idea that had taken possession of her soon after coming to Castel Brianza, was it but a fancy on her part? If not, might it not have much to do with the secret which was burdening Madame and perplexing her son? Was it her duty to mention to him what was after all a mere suspicion, a suspicion she had not felt justified in breathing even to Léon? To speak of it to Monsieur the captain, surely that would be to go further than her duty. Would it not be to act the

part of a traitor to one who had acted to herself the part at once of friend and mother?

De Rohan broke in upon her worried thoughts. "That other name you mentioned, mademoiselle, this Jules Bersour, what of him?"

She hesitated. "Monsieur, I do not know that I ought to have spoken of Jules. It was so long ago, and indeed I have sometimes thought since that perhaps I was mistaken. It is scarce possible, methinks, that Madame your mother could have any cause to fear Jules Bersour. He is a good man; he could never have been a bad man." And in a few words she told de Rohan the story of the trooper's devotion to Léon and herself at the time of their troubles. "It was when Jules asked Madame to shelter me that I fancied she looked as if she knew he had the right to demand a favour of her," concluded the girl. "That is now many months ago. I have never seen our faithful Jules since then."

De Rohan would have liked to ask for more particulars, but the break in the girl's mournful voice checked him.

"Bersour is a native of Mondovi in Dauphiné," added Azerole, remembering an item she had omitted to mention.

"Mondovi?" repeated Gaston slowly, his mind apparently working out some problem. "That is the name of the mountain village in North Dauphiné to which my mother retired immediately after the death of my father. At the time I was with my regiment in the Netherlands, and to my grief I was unable to go

to her until the end of the campaign, when I succeeded in obtaining a short leave of absence. I found my mother, who had removed by that time to Paris, so completely crushed by her bereavement that it seemed more than she could bear to speak of her loss even to me. Seeing the state she was in I judged it best to turn away her thoughts from these sad memories; and, thinking to comfort her, I spoke of my resolution to quit the army and return home to fill, as far as might be, the place a husband's death had left empty. But she would not hear of it, not at least until peace had been proclaimed for France, she said. You know her strong will, mademoiselle. I knew it were worse than useless to attempt at such a time to thwart her. I have had but one short furlough since."

De Rohan paused a moment, and into his face there came a look of still keener distress. "Up to the time of my father's death I had no secrets from my mother, nor she from me. But, from the day I returned to find her a widow, and so changed as to be hardly recognisable, I have been conscious of some indefinable something between us. My poor mother!" He sighed deeply. "I feel convinced that she is guarding some painful secret. But what in the name of wonder can Alphonse Têtu have to do with the mystery? He is despicable enough for anything, and, if his aim in annoying the mother is thereby to reach the son he hates, I confess he has succeeded."

"You, monsieur? He hates *you?*" cried Azerole, with a quick-caught breath.

But he answered with light unconcern. "In France,

it is but a year or two ago, the abbé hatched a little plot against a certain gentleman of fortune. The said fortune Monsieur l'Abbé had planned to secure for himself by means of its owner's ruin. The little plot, however, was frustrated. How, was never made public; but Monsieur my cousin suspected me of having had a hand in the upsetting of his schemes, and his suspicions were not altogether incorrect. Mademoiselle Montoux, the Abbé Têtu never forgets."

"Ah! in time, monsieur, he will. He will!" broke in Azerole, with an earnestness of which she herself was hardly aware. "Surely, monsieur, you are not likely to have to stand in his way again."

Gaston smiled somewhat bitterly. "Unfortunately it is my fate to be obliged to stand in Monsieur l'Abbé's way so long as I live. I told you that Alphonse Têtu's memory is a good one. It is not likely, therefore, to let slip the fact that his cousin Gaston is now the only one who stands between him and the de Rohan estates in Dauphiné. Failing a brother or a son to Gaston de Rohan, Alphonse Têtu is the direct male heir."

Azerole's lips suddenly parted, then as quickly were firmly shut. That odd fancy of hers—ought she to divulge it? she asked herself again. But the question remained unanswered, and when she spoke her hurried words had nothing to do with the strange thought that had but a moment before darted through her mind. Fear of the abbé and his power to work evil against Gaston de Rohan had driven all else from her for the time being. "Does Madame your mother know that the Abbé Têtu bears you a grudge, monsieur?"

"I believe not. And it is better so."

"Yes, it is better so."

Something in the tone of her voice made him look quickly into her face, and he saw it had grown pale. He smiled reassuringly. "There is nothing to fear for me, mademoiselle, I shall soon be beyond the reach of Alphonse Têtu's cousinly solicitude. Moreover, I have a shrewd suspicion—hope, I should say—that Castel Brianza will soon be rid of the abbé's unwelcome attentions. It is my conviction that his protracted visit to Piedmont has been prompted solely by affectionate concern for the well-being of his dear relative Captain de Rohan, and that my departure will be the signal for his. It may even be that affection prompts in him the wish to accompany me." For the second time Azerole gave a frightened start, but de Rohan laughed lightly. "My men-at-arms are trusty. Moreover, I intend to give the abbé most uncourteously the slip by altering the hour named for the start, which will now be fixed for to-morrow at midnight. In time, perchance, Alphonse Têtu will come to understand that Gaston de Rohan is a match for him. Nevertheless," the captain's light tone changed, and he spoke now with grave impressiveness, "nevertheless it is needful to warn you to be on your guard, mademoiselle, not only on my mother's account but," he moved a step nearer to her, "but on your own." It distressed him to have to alarm her, yet had he but known the truth, it was not fear for herself which had driven the blood from the girl's cheeks. "And if at any time you should be in need of help or advice do not scruple to apply

at once to my mother's man of business in Turin. Signor Bocelli is one to be fully relied on, and he will know how to communicate with me if necessary. Ah, mademoiselle, can you guess that I could scarce leave my mother at this time save for the thought that I may entrust her to your care?"

He bent down as he spoke, his eyes looking into hers, but she drew back a little and rather hurriedly introduced another subject. "You have spoken, monsieur, to Madame your mother about Christophe?"

"I have, mademoiselle, indeed more than once, but I fear to little purpose. All that I could obtain was a promise that, when I return, which I hope to do in the next spring or summer, we shall consider the question of calling in some medical celebrity."

"I think, monsieur, that you have obtained a great deal. It may lead, if it please God, to great results."

De Rohan seemed scarcely to have heard. "It was a strange fancy this of my mother's," he said musingly. Azerole glanced at him inquiringly. "I imagine that in the despair of her great loneliness she had yielded to the suggestion of a well-meaning friend that she should adopt some uncared-for foundling, and that all too late she had discovered the child could not be to her in the place of her own. She is far too tender-hearted to turn him adrift now, and it is evident that the little fellow has happily not the slightest idea that she does not care for him. But I confess it baffles me to understand how she can resist the sweet lovableness of our poor little-man-Christophe!"

Here Azerole turned abruptly to leave the glade,

murmuring indistinctly something about its being time to return to the château. Gaston would fain have detained her, for he had not said all, nay not the half he had come to the woods to say; but there was that in her manner, at once gentle yet commanding, that forbade his opposing his will to hers. "Better to bide my time," was the sage advice he gave to himself.

On emerging from the wood the low hanging branch of a tree caught Azerole's cloak and dragged it half off her shoulders. She stopped to readjust her hood, and for the moment turned her back to the wind which had risen. De Rohan was assisting her to fasten her mantle more firmly when a slight rustle among the undergrowth of the ilex grove behind the glade they had just left made Azerole start nervously.

"What is it, mademoiselle?" he asked, noticing her startled look.

The sound of his voice seemed to dispel her momentary fear. "Pardon me, monsieur, it was but a foolish fancy. Assuredly there can be naught to fear. But let us proceed more quickly, I pray you. The darkness is coming on." And, leading the way, she pressed hurriedly on, unwilling to confess even to him that her excited imagination had led her to imagine that she had seen the figure of a man moving stealthily away from the fast deepening shadows of the plantations.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTOPHE'S FIRST WALK

No sooner was supper over that evening than Azerole, leaving mother and son alone together, made her escape from the dining-hall, and betook herself upstairs to the little sitting-room which Christophe and she used as a schoolroom when visitors were at the château. And there, kneeling by the window, she looked out at the moonlit night, seeing nothing, however, of the silvered, fairy-like scene, so absorbed was she by the one thought—by to-morrow at midnight Gaston de Rohan would be gone. "How sorrowfully Madame his mother will miss him!" she said to herself, repeating the words over and over as if to force back into silence another thought that pressed, but in vain, for utterance.

Left alone, Madame Héloise and Gaston established themselves in the boudoir. The young man, seating himself boyish fashion on the arm of his mother's easy-chair, talked brightly, doing his best to cheer both her and himself. Presently, with a well-assumed carelessness, he told her of the slight alteration he had made in his plans, explaining that for various unforeseen reasons he had found it would be necessary for him to start some hours earlier than he had intended. She took the news far better than he had

expected, considering that, as he well knew, how she had been counting with a jealous miserliness the hours that were still left to her of his stay. She had been leaning her head against his arm, but now she straightened herself, her fingers hurriedly clasping and unclasping each other—those white fingers on which the jewelled rings hung so loosely, how thin they were! Gaston looked from them to the pale, sad face with the one feverish spot burning on the wasted cheek. "Madre mia," he said tenderly, putting his arm protectingly round her slender waist, "carissima mia, this is too lonely a home for you. The solitude of your life here is more than you can bear. It is wearing you to a shadow. Leave Castel Brianza and return to Dauphiné. At Les Rochers de Rohan you would have——"

She stopped him with a quick gesture. "No, no, no," she cried, "not there, not there!" And in her vehemence she half rose from her seat, then, conscious of a trembling in her limbs, sank back in her chair.

"What a hold the memory of my father's death has upon her even now!" reflected Gaston. "It will not do to urge her further."

"Do not ask me, my son, to go away from Castel Brianza. Here I am as happy—nay, not happy, that I can never be again—but I am as much at peace here as I could be anywhere. The place is lonely, do you say? That is what I want—to be alone." Then, seeing his dissatisfied look, she added, "I have Mademoiselle Montoux. She is a great comfort to me."

"I am glad Mademoiselle Montoux is with you," he

returned quietly, "but I mean that you shall have me also with you before very long. Assuredly this campaign must needs finish the war; and when it is over I intend to apply for my discharge and return home, at any rate for a time. The estates both here and in France would be none the worse for having a master's oversight occasionally, and you would be glad to have your boy near at hand, eh, madre mia?"

If it had cost the young soldier something to make up his mind to interrupt his military career, the flash of joy that lit up his mother's face completely blinded him for the moment to the fact that there had been any self-sacrifice.

"To have you with me always? Ah, Gaston, my boy, if only that might be!" Here, however, some unwelcome recollection came across her mind, her face changed, the light faded from her eyes, and there crept into them again the old look of miserable unrest. When she resumed her tone was sharp. "Of what are we talking? A son of the house of de Rohan deserting the army? Never! Nay, Gaston, your duty is to your king and country. We were both forgetting ourselves."

"A son's first duty, I hold, is to his mother," he firmly rejoined. "In serving mine I serve my country. And, to tell the truth, I am not now the blind enthusiast for bloodshed that once I was. These eternal campaigns, they sicken me. For the aggrandisement of His Most Christian Majesty, or for the glory of France—which you will—we make war upon unoffending nations, and take the very bread out of our people's mouths to pay

the cost of these plundering raids. Starving poor at home, heart-rending scenes of ruin and devastation abroad, are such the true greatness of France?" Gaston's voice had kindled with indignation, but, seeing his mother's distressed look, he turned off the subject with a light laugh. "Ah, madre mia, I am a sad dog, I know. In France there are those who call me reprobate —disloyal in politics, sceptical in religion, and I know not what beside. But, in spite of it all, ma mie, in spite of it all, I am your own boy still; and, were I to think that my presence would help somewhat to chase away the desolate sadness from your home and heart, I——"

Again she interrupted him. "It—it—it is not as you think," she murmured almost inaudibly, shrinking a little from him. Once, twice she tried to go on, but failed, and finally broke down in a passionate fit of weeping. The sound of his voice, the touch of his caressing hand upon her hair, helped her as she struggled with herself, but it was some little time before she recovered her composure. Some nameless terror seemed to have seized her, and she clung to him, yet half-fearful, apparently, that he would repulse her. "Gaston," she moaned, turning a wan face up to him, "Gaston, your mother is a poor, erring woman. If you knew all you would despise her. But you say you are my boy, you will not turn against your mother? Gaston, say you will not."

Her agitation was extreme, and she trembled from head to foot. With every endearing word he could think of he tried to soothe her. "Your son has loved

you, madre mia, ever since he could lisp the dear name of mother, and he will continue to love you while life lasts," he replied, but he doubted whether she heard him.

"Ofttimes I have been tempted to tell you all," she went on hurriedly, "but I was not brave enough. When you are gone, doubtless I shall be glad that I kept silence. Better the past be buried with myself. Better——"

She did not finish the sentence, but lay back in her chair utterly exhausted. Patiently Gaston waited. At last she sat up, a look of sudden resolution in her face. "My son, I promise that on your return I will tell you all. I—Hark! what is that?" With a startled exclamation she broke off and bent forward in an attitude of listening.

"I heard naught," returned Gaston, striding towards the door, which he opened to convince her that her nerves had played her false. But now even his ears were aware of a sound that seemed to come from a far-off part of the house. The cry, though muffled by distance, was like the scream of one either in fear or pain. "A maid-servant affrighted," was Gaston's thought, and he sprang towards the stair leading to the west wing of the building. But his mother gained it first. "Christophe!" she gasped, while, as if with winged feet, she mounted the winding stairs, Gaston following close behind. And now the sounds reached them more plainly. Scream succeeding scream, but ever growing fainter, guided them to Christophe's bedroom. From another part of the château hurried old

Jacqueline, while from all directions servants came running with pale, scared faces.

But Azerole was before them all. In the room where now all was still she knelt on the floor, her woollen cloak wrapped about something that lay on the rug in the front of the open hearth. "It is but the shock," she whispered to Madame Héloise, who knelt also and gazed with an agonised expression at the white unconscious face pillowed on the girl's arm. "Nay, nay, Madame, it is but the shock. I think he is not much burnt."

Jacqueline, who was skilled in such things, had already hurried off to procure lint and oil; but Madame, turning to Gaston, gasped out, "Ride for Brother Thomas. There is none nearer."

"The friar knows naught. I will ride to Pinerolo for Monsieur Vaux, the surgeon of the garrison," replied de Rohan.

Even at that supreme moment Azerole had room for another thought. "Take one of the men-at-arms with you, monsieur."

Replying to her pleading look with a reassuring "I will, mademoiselle," he was gone.

It was in the grey light of the early dawn that the sound of galloping hoofs announced the return of Gaston with the surgeon. Lights burned in the château, where already all were astir; indeed, few of the household had been in bed that night. At the open hall-door stood Azerole, and for a moment at least the shadow of care on her brow was chased away by her relief at the sight of the two riders now dismounting in the court. In answer to Gaston's

inquiring glance she shook her head sorrowfully. "He is still unconscious, monsieur."

"Where, mademoiselle?" brusquely demanded the surgeon, his unprepossessing manner redeemed by a certain rough kindliness.

But she stood aside, not offering to lead the way, and Gaston took the medical man upstairs. Left alone in the hall Azerole leant wearily against a pillar, and slowly the shadow crept again into her face. But this time it was hardly anxiety that brought it there, it was heart-pain. For the first time since the almost forgotten days of long ago at Castel Brianza, Madame Héloise had given the young Vaudoise to understand that she was not wanted. With a peremptoriness that almost amounted to harshness she had been ordered to leave the sick-room and go to bed. Madame herself would see to Monsieur de Beaurégard until the surgeon arrived. And were she to need help, Jacqueline was there. She wished for no one else. And Azerole had without a word obeyed. She would not return until she was sent for, she had proudly said to herself; but now, waiting alone in the hall, the suspense was more than she could bear, and she crept upstairs again, nervously eager to hear the surgeon's report.

"He will live. Ma foi! yes, he will live!" said M. Vaux, pulling absently at his long beard. "He is not much hurt. And," this half to himself, "who can tell but this very accident may prove that he has greater vitality and strength of constitution than was heretofore supposed? It is an interesting case, a highly interesting case. I should be only too pleased

to watch it, were it for the sake of medical science alone, Madame."

Not a little reassured by this comforting verdict, Azerole hurried away to see to the providing of food for the hungry riders. An hour later she returned to the sick-room to try once more to persuade Madame to take some rest. Already there was a slight improvement perceptible in the condition of the patient, and the surgeon's words had been most cheering, nevertheless Madame Héloise refused absolutely to quit her post by the bedside. With a jealous fierceness she repulsed for the second time Azerole's gentle offer to take her place; nor did she seem conscious that to outsiders this monopolising care of her poor little ward was curiously inconsistent with her former indifference. Was her present devotion meant to be an atonement for past neglect? the servants asked each other.

The long day wore on. Throughout these weary hours of waiting, Azerole, with a tender patience that Jacqueline marvelled at, had borne the jealous irritability with which Madame Héloise persisted in refusing the most unobtrusive offer of assistance; but at length, as the afternoon was waning towards evening, physical weakness forced Madame to give way. She was fain to sink down in an easy-chair by the fire, and, with just sufficient strength left to swallow a cup of strong broth which Jacqueline had in readiness, lay back, and in a moment had fallen into a heavy doze.

Half-an-hour later a movement from the bed made Azerole spring quickly towards it. Christophe, his

blue eyes wide-awake and conscious, was looking wonderingly at his bandaged arm which lay outside the counterpane. Azerole bent over him. "Chéri!" she murmured tenderly and pressed her lips to his white forehead, then stepped hurriedly aside to make way for Madame de Rohan, who had been aroused on the instant by the slight stir.

Christophe smiled on recognising his nurses. "Was I naughty?" he whispered feebly, his gaze wandering from Azerole's face to Madame Héloise's, and lingering doubtfully yet lovingly there. "I wanted to let Gaston know before he went away that I was a man and could walk. Eh bien, and I did it!" In the poor little voice even now there was something like a faint ring of triumph. "I had tried standing many times, but alone, that I might not affright you, Madame Héloise. But, yesternight, bravo! I walked quite a long way—three—four big steps—quite straight and strong; but, hélas! the room began to go round, and the fire ran to meet me, and—and——"

Azerole, fearing he would exhaust himself, softly laid her fingers on his lips. "Go for the surgeon," whispered Madame Héloise. "He said to summon him when he awoke." But, upon Azerole's turning to obey, she saw Monsieur Vaux and Gaston standing at the open door. Irritated by the girl's continuing to remain where she was, Madame, again with that jealous light in her eyes, pushed her aside. "Go, girl, go, I tell you," she commanded excitedly. "Why do you stay here? You are not his——"

"Pardon, Madame, you are right," Azerole hurriedly

interposed. "You are right. I am not his guardian; I will go."

The words, spoken in the soothing undertone one might use in quieting a frightened child, had a strangely calming effect upon Madame de Rohan. "Forgive me, mon enfant," she whispered hastily, "I—I—I am not myself. Stay—stay with me, Azerole?" and she laid an entreating hand on the young girl's arm.

Monsieur Vaux was highly pleased with his little patient's condition, and still more so in the evening when he paid his third visit to the sick-room. "He will do," he said to the group waiting for his report. Glancing towards the bed where the boy lay sleeping soundly he went on, addressing Madame de Rohan, "We shall soon have Monsieur de Beaurégard himself again—certes, more himself than in all his little life heretofore, for we shall have him on his legs. His first walk I warrant is not like to be his last. Within two weeks from now, I am ready to swear it, we shall permit him to venture upon his second. Certes, it will be on crutches; but hearken, mes amies, even crutches will not be for long. That boy," he spoke with slow impressiveness, "that boy, when he gets over this little accident, is going to get well and strong."

Azerole and Gaston exchanged glances. Old Jacqueline uttered a fervent "The saints be praised!" But Madame Héloise spoke never a word. Slowly she turned her back to the bed, and looked the surgeon straight in the face. Her own was pale and set, and her voice had the hard ring it was wont to have when she was putting a strong restraint upon herself.

"Strong and well? Like other boys? Did you mean it, monsieur?"

He bowed gravely. "Madame, I am not the voice of the gods, but I believe it will be as I say. 'Well,' do you ask? I confidently expect it. 'Strong?' perhaps never even at his best quite a Hercules; and neither well nor strong immediately. But 'patienza,' as they say here, Madame; patienza. One day—" Monsieur Vaux paused a moment. He had turned again to the bed, and was watching the fair little face resting on the pillow. And while he gazed he was recalling an incident of his visit in the afternoon. Dimly conscious that the big stranger who bent over him, and whose huge hands touched him so gently, was a doctor, Christophe had looked up into the rugged face above him and murmured wistfully his old refrain as he dropped off to sleep—"I want to be a man and walk." There was a sudden softening now of the surgeon's rough voice, a sudden dimness in his keen black eyes. "One day," he said slowly, "one day Monsieur Christophe de Beaurégard is going to be a man and walk."

CHAPTER XIV

MAN PROPOSES, BUT—

"And so, brother Alphonse, the long and the short of it is that you have failed to untie the purse-strings of Madame your cousin of Brianza," and with a short laugh Prior Ugon leant back in his high chair, his thin sharp features showing like a clear-cut cameo against the dark background of the carved ebony. There was a curious greyness in the face of Prior Ugon Rorenco, an unusual languor at times in his manner, and, although he had mechanically poured out for himself a glass of the rare Armagnac he had produced for his guest, the prior had not as yet so much as tasted the wine. The hour was nearly midnight, but still he and the Abbé Têtu, engaged in earnest talk, sat over the supper-table in the Prior of Lucerna's private sanctum.

There had been a covert sneer in Prior Ugon's words, and Monsieur l'Abbé's face, already flushed with wine, deepened almost to purple with quick resentment. "Given a fair field I should have succeeded," he said, enforcing his words with a deep but low imprecation, while he emptied his glass at one draught. "My old powers of intimidation could have but little play with Madame while monsieur her son was eternally on the

spot. But now we shall be rid of him for a time at least, and time for us is everything. We shall have a free hand now, that is, Ugon Rorenco will."

"And wherefore not Alphonse Têtu?" asked the other, as the abbé paused.

"I cannot be in two places at once, mon ami, and I have this very day written to offer my services as voluntary chaplain to the army of France now under orders for the frontier of Germany."

"Truly a noble act of disinterestedness on your part, my dear brother, and actuated without doubt by an affectionate desire to look after the spiritual needs of your countrymen, more especially any relatives of yours who may chance to be in the field."

"Precisely, mon ami."

Neither man looked at the other, and for a moment there was a silence between the two, each being engrossed with scheming how best to serve his own ends in the plans they were met together to form. The prior, although he had drunk nothing, was plotting with a brain less clear and calculating than usual, and there were times when it was only by a great effort that he was able to rouse himself and throw off the feeling of drowsiness that was creeping over him. He was conscious also of the return of that curious numbness which he had felt more than once throughout the day. With a vague idea that he was better without stimulants, he had hitherto abstained from drinking. Now, however, and at all costs, he told himself he must be able to think. Seizing a bottle of cognac which was on the table, he poured out a considerable quantity and

tossed it off. A dull red flush came into his face and mounted to his forehead. His brain was fired at last; for the moment his power of thinking was restored.

"Listen to me, brother Alphonse. It is money you want—*and* the girl. It is money I must have—for the sake of our holy monastic house now in financial straits. You thought you had only to ask, or mayhap to threaten, in order to obtain gold in plenty from Madame de Rohan. Your vague menaces to reveal the truth about Major de Rohan have failed. Yet Madame Héloise fears you. I have read it in her eyes. It is my belief that the real cause of her dread is as yet unknown to you. You cannot use a weapon, however powerful, Monsieur l'Abbé, until it is in your hand."

That Prior Ugon's astute surmise had for some little time been Monsieur l'Abbé's own by no means tended to allay that ecclesiastic's growing irritation. "Certes, you wield the most powerful weapon yourself," he snarled. "The sacrament of penance should make all plain sailing for the father confessor."

It was the prior's turn to wince, for had he not failed in the confessional even more signally than the abbé had failed in his cousinly visitations at the château? And the sting of the Abbé Têtu's remark lay in the fact that its innocence was only on the surface. But Prior Ugon kept his temper. In losing it he might lose much besides. After all, since he and the abbé were useful to one another, it was best, outwardly at least, to remain friends. "All in good time, all in good time, my brother," he said suavely. "I too have a little

scheme of my own; but, like yours, it will succeed only when the coast is clear. That accursed barbette"—the prior's face darkened with a sudden scowl—"it is she with her infernal influence that of late has stood in my way. But she shall not stand much longer. What think you Madame said to me but a few weeks agone, when I was representing to her the responsibility of widows who had it in their power to provide for the repose of the souls of their dead. 'Is it my own or my husband's soul that I shall be called to account for at the bar of God, Prior Ugon?' Truly an answer worthy of the viper Vaudoise herself!"

A smile that was not pleasant to see curved the Abbé Têtu's lips. "It strikes me, mon ami, that you are strangely slow in the exercising of discipline in your diocese."

The prior, in nowise disconcerted, smiled in his turn. "Patienza, patienza, Monsieur l'Abbé. It is needed if you would not scare the bird away from the net. My bird will walk with her eyes open into the snare I shall prepare, but she will walk in the dark." Leaning his arms upon the table he brought his face close to his companion. "Madame de Rohan has some secret burdening her soul. It is such women as she to whom the Church offers peace of conscience, through acts of reparation on the part of the penitent. To this end I mean to work. But I must have, as you say, a free hand. The barbette's pernicious influence must be removed, and you, my brother, you will without doubt take means to prevent the return of Monsieur de Rohan to Castel Brianza."

There was for the second time a moment's silence in the room. Then, while the abbé once more drained his glass, the prior continued: "Fearing to precipitate matters with our haughty Madame de Rohan, and believing in your promises of substantial help, monsieur, I have up till now permitted these two Vaudois to go unmolested. But the sacredness of my office forbids such laxity in the future. In the hope of saving the souls even of the wretched barbets themselves, but much more for the sake of delivering the faithful from heretical contamination, I must obtain possession of Léon and Azerole Montoux. It will not be an easy task, I confess. The brother and sister have wormed their way among the country-folk, and there is a reaction in public feeling towards the people of the valleys since the recent—ahem—somewhat sweeping measures against these odious schismatics. So that, not only do these accursed Montoux have powerful friends, whom it would be impolitic for me to offend; but, truth to tell, I scarce know one individual who could be bribed to lend a hand to drive these wolves out of the true fold in the name of our Holy Mother Church. Nevertheless I will——"

The prior, who had spoken with extreme slowness, stopped abruptly and passed his hand across his brow, upon which the swollen veins stood out like cords. He knew this horrible sensation of pressure on the brain. It would pass. He had often been annoyed by it during the past weeks.

"Look here, Ugon," broke in the abbé, pushing aside his glass and speaking eagerly. "I want that girl.

Her voice, as I told you, would be invaluable to me. I can help you to get rid of *her*."

"How?" demanded the other, a touch of doubt in his tone.

"Gaston de Rohan is in love with the girl." A low exclamation broke from the prior. "Old Broussel's blockhead of a nephew is still more so, as he believes. Michel Roussier will serve us for a tool admirably. I have for some time past been employing the grindstone of jealousy to sharpen him for use. I am expecting his return from Turin now any day. Hearken, mon ami." And Monsieur l'Abbé, drawing closer to his friend, whispered in his ear.

Prior Ugon listened intently. "Good, Monsieur l'Abbé," he muttered thickly, "very good!"

"And see here," went on the other, speaking with clear deliberation, for there was a strange look on the prior's face at times as if he did not hear, or hearing did not understand. "You must needs manage this business in my absence, and at once. I will tell you when and where to send the girl. It were best, methinks, to have her removed direct to the school of St. Cyr. Madame de Maintenon's extraordinary passion for the conversion of heretic maidens will induce her to pay highly for this one, who, happily for us, is possessed of rare accomplishments and attractions. And, when the scales are still further weighted with her magnificent voice, verily she will prove an invaluable boon for St. Cyr. Mais, voilà! but the widow Scarron will find herself obliged to confess that the treasure I have to offer is well-nigh

a priceless one. And, if all goes well, I swear to you, my brother, that there will be a considerable sum that will fall to the share of the monastery of Lucerna——"

"And if all goes not well but ill, Monsieur l'Abbé? If the young Vaudoise proves not docile?"

The other's face darkened. "Eh bien, in such a case the hardened heretic herself, and not Holy Mother Church, must bear the guilt of a lost soul," and the ecclesiastic crossed himself piously. "But in truth I have thought of this possibility. In the event of Mademoiselle Montoux proving intractable, and therefore useless for my purposes, I shall convey to monsieur my cousin a hint of her whereabouts. His subsequent procedure will without doubt furnish me at a bound with the information concerning himself which I am collecting but slowly."

"Information concerning Monsieur de Rohan?" repeated the prior perplexedly.

His companion darted a keen look at him. "You are somewhat dense to-night, mon ami. I think you must understand that were Gaston de Rohan convicted of heresy, as his father before him would have been had he but lived a little longer, then the family estates in Dauphiné would revert to me—I mean, of course, to Mother Church. That he is a Huguenot at heart I make no doubt. The most notable evidence I have of this is the fact of his boldly defrauding me—I mean Mother Church — of the property of the notorious Huguenot seigneur Monsieur de Mascaron a year or two agone. It appears, however, that something more

palpable in proof of his apostasy must needs be forthcoming in order to convince others, and that something more I mean to have before long," concluded the abbé, a malevolent gleam momentarily lighting up the cold steel of his eyes. "Gaston de Rohan is a danger to his country, and, what is worse, a danger to the Church. It is the holy duty of all faithful churchmen to deprive every such renegade of the wherewithal to work further evil."

A sudden thought came to the prior. He pressed his hand on his forehead. If he could but think it out clearly! "You will without a doubt have a greater chance of gaining your end outside of Piedmont, brother, but I warn you it will be needful to walk with slow wariness. Monsieur de Rohan's maternal grandfather was a naturalised Piedmontese, and a great favourite at the Court of Turin. Duke Amadeus is likely to resent any action taken by France against the descendants of his father's old friend the Baron de Castelane."

The abbé shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "The duke and his Most Catholic Majesty are at present too good friends for Victor Amadeus to interfere with any action of the Church which has the sanction of his great ally of France," he returned with easy assurance.

A sudden commotion in the court below made the two ecclesiastics start to their feet, and Alphonse Têtu, for the prior did not move, went to the window and threw open the heavy shutters. "What is it, Brother John?" he called, leaning out. He could see by the

light of the torch carried by the porter that a rider had dismounted from his horse, and was being relieved of his baggage by some of the lay-brothers who had come into the court on the stranger's arrival.

"If it please your excellency, it is a courier from France with a despatch for the Abbé Têtu."

"Send him up at once," was the command.

A moment later and the abbé was tearing open a letter, which proved to be from the archbishop of his diocese. As he read his face darkened, and the next moment he had flung the paper to the other end of the apartment. The prior watched, half contemptuously, half dully, while his guest, in a state of angry excitement, strode up and down the room uttering imprecations. "Holy Mother of God, but it would madden a saint, although that is mayhap not how you might describe me even to my face, mon ami. Ma foi! but here is a pretty state of affairs! The clergy and monks of the chapter in open revolt, and the archbishop incensed. His reverence's epistle—all but a censure for neglect of duty—broadly hints that my long absence from my post has been the cause of an ecclesiastical scandal. Ma foi! if that be the black mood he is in, he is but little likely to look with favour upon my self-sacrificing offer to act military chaplain to his Majesty! Think of it! he peremptorily orders my return! This is the work of his grace the Bishop of Lyons, I will swear. He is ever working underground for the undoing of me. But I will be *his* undoing yet. I will—" another volley of unclerical expletives finished the sentence. "And this too, just when the game was in

our hands! Eh bien, but I shall return. Meanwhile, friend Ugon, you may get all in train and wait for me. It will not be for long, I promise you; no, it will not be for long, I swear it, that you will have to wait."

Prior Ugon stared blankly. The effect of the stimulant seemed to have gone off, and that strange numb feeling was once more creeping over him, all down his right side. He was not certain that he had altogether followed the angry mutterings of the abbé, yet surely—surely—there was something he ought to grasp—something important? At all costs, he said to himself again, he must be able to think. With a last great effort of will he roused his slumbering faculties. "Bene, bene," it was coming to him now—but he must keep it dark—he knew the secret of the abbé's little game; he, Ugon Rorenco, could play it without Monsieur l'Abbé's assistance; and, when the game was won, the prize need not be divided. The prior smiled to himself, his lips twisting strangely. "Yes, yes, my brother," he said in a thick, hesitating voice, "I will wait. Certes, I will wait. As you say, it will not be for long. It——"

He made a spasmodic movement to hold out his hand to his friend, but his arm refused to do his bidding. A thrill of nameless fear passed over him, and his face grew distorted with horror. One wild struggle he made to rise. There was a choking sound in his throat, then he fell with a crash to the floor. The Prior of Lucerna was dead.

CHAPTER XV

NEVER

"WHAT is it that you say, mademoiselle? It can never be? Nay, but you shall not say those words again. You did not speak them at the first. Your heart does not say them now."

Gaston de Rohan spoke in a tone of assurance, but it was forced; his face was pale, and the eyes that searched Azerole's betrayed the anxiety that was torturing him. She could not meet the look. Her head drooped, and the cheeks which had been flushed grew slowly white.

"I must say them again, monsieur, I must," she said, speaking hurriedly, as if she distrusted her own resolution if she delayed. "I did not speak them at the first, because—because of surprise, and just for a moment or two I did not remember. Ah! how could I forget?"

"Remember? What had she remembered?" he asked himself. Then, a sudden thought occurring to him, he impulsively gave it utterance. A moment's reflection would have withheld it. "Mademoiselle, that you are a Vaudoise is no barrier. When Gaston de Rohan asks the hand of a demoiselle he asks herself. Aught else does not even enter into his thoughts." He stopped, but it was too late.

She drew herself erect and proudly. "Monsieur, you forget I am a de Montélimart."

"I *had* forgotten, mademoiselle."

The simple admission was the greatest honour he could have paid her. But she seemed not to have heard him. The momentary touch of hauteur gone, her face wore its old troubled look, and the lips were unsteady that formed the words she whispered to herself rather than to him: "It can never be; never!"

It was the evening of Thursday, the day which had dawned so gloomily on Christophe's account. Monsieur Vaux, after promising to ride over to the château early the next morning, had returned to his duties at the citadel of Pinerolo, and at Madame Héloise's earnest desire Azerole, throwing a light wrap over her shoulders, had gone out to the garden for a breath of fresh air, and, hardly knowing where she went, had wandered as far as the clump of azerolier trees beyond the cherry orchard.

And thither de Rohan, lying in wait for his opportunity, had followed her, followed that he might tell in his straightforward way the old, old story of a true man's love. And now he stood before her with the answer she had given him ringing in his ears. His pallor and the stern set of his features alone betrayed the soldier's fierce battling with a pain so sharp that at every heart-throb, man though he was, he winced. "Never!" she had said; "it can never be!" But to the young and strong hope is hard to kill. Resolutely crushing down his despair, Gaston, who had walked on a pace or two in order to master, or, at least, to conceal from

her the suffering he was enduring, turned about and saw, with a sudden bounding of his pulses, the look on Azerole's face. "It cannot be that she does not love me. I will not believe it. It must be that—" he broke off, for at that moment what he fondly believed to be an inspiration came to him. "You are remembering your parents, Mademoiselle Montoux," he said gently, and he took one of her hands in his. "Let me share that sorrow with you. We will search the world over for them, you and I; and when we have found them our home shall be theirs."

This was too much for her composure. The tender thoughtfulness of his love, coupled with the sudden realisation of orphanhood that rushed over her with an overwhelming sense of desolation, broke her down. Oh, that she had had her mother now to go to in this her hour of need! Another time she might have conquered herself, but since the night before she had been on the strain, and both physically and mentally was unhinged. Sinking down on the grass under an azerolier, she gave way to a passion of tears. The chevalier looked on helplessly. "It is her mother she is breaking her heart for," he said to himself, a momentary pang of jealousy adding fuel to the flame of his love. "And I have not even the right to try to comfort her."

Captain de Rohan's instinct told him she would recover more quickly if he left her to herself; accordingly he strode to the further end of the glade, where he paced up and down, his slow footsteps making no sound on the soft turf.

Thinking he had gone, Azerole wept on unrestrainedly,

but not for long. Bravely she struggled with herself. The forces of her unselfish and resolute nature came to her help, and soon the choking sobs were conquered and she was sitting quiet enough, her head still buried in her hands. The numbness of exhaustion which began to creep over her brought a certain sense of relief, and it was with a start almost of pain that she heard de Rohan's voice, and knew he was standing beside her.

"Mademoiselle—" she made no sign. "Azerole—let us at the least be open with each other. I have told you that I love you; that you, and none but you, will ever be my wife. Am I right in thinking that—that—perchance you love me?" She answered him neither yes nor no, but her silence, little as she meant it, spoke for her. Coming nearer still, he took gentle but firm possession of her hands. "Azerole, what is it that dares to come between you and me?"

Slowly she rose and faced him. "Monsieur, you have yourself said it. I am a Vaudoise." But he only gazed bewildered. It had not dawned upon him as a possibility that in a contest between love and religious scruples the latter might win. She saw she must explain herself. "In the Vaudois Bible, monsieur, it is written—'Be not unequally yoked together with—'" her voice faltered, and it was with difficulty he caught the last word of a quotation which was quite unfamiliar to him—"'with unbelievers.'"

The colour mounted to his face. This then was the barrier. But surely it was not insurmountable? "Mademoiselle, I am no bigoted Papist, as by this time

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you must know right well. You may trust me. Not one word in favour of the Catholic as against the Reformed religion will you ever hear from me. It is true I have not your clear faith in the Scriptures and the God of the Scriptures, but surely such questions need not separate us? We can agree to differ, Azerole."

"'Can two walk together except they be agreed?'" He guessed now that she was again quoting from the Vaudois Bible, and he made no response. "We should not be walking together, we should be living apart—and —and—for me at least that would be not life but death. Monsieur de Rohan," she went on, gently but decidedly withdrawing her hands from his, "I am only a weak, faulty woman. Too often my feet falter and stumble on the pilgrim way, where at every turn there lurks temptation. He who walks along life's way with me must not be a hindrance but a helpmeet."

Eagerly he spoke in answer. "Mademoiselle, hear me. I dare swear it that your influence, were you my wife, would make of me what you willed. I seem somewhere to have read or heard it, that even these same Scriptures of yours would fain plead for me, as the husband who might be won 'by the conversation of the wife.'"

There was a minute, a long minute's silence. Azerole hardly breathed. She had come to a turn of the pilgrim way to find a subtle temptation lurking there. But, when she raised her head and spoke, it was in the tones of one who is more than conqueror through Him that loved her. "Monsieur, you are the captain of a regiment. Your men have sworn to fight at your com-

mand. Disobedience would be mutiny. I too am a soldier. And these, as I have told you, are my marching orders—'Be not unequally yoked.' Loyalty to my commanding officer leaves me no choice but to obey. Any attempt of mine to win you to the side of the truth would fail without the blessing of God on my efforts. It were naught but profanity to ask His blessing on that which He has forbidden."

Her voice had gathered strength as she went on, and Gaston, ignorant of the hidden source of her courage, mistook it for the religious fanaticism with which the Reformed sects were credited by the orthodox churchman. "I see, mademoiselle," he returned, a little bitterly, "I see love counts for nothing when loyalty puts in her claim."

"Nay, monsieur, there you are wrong, for loyalty is but another name for love."

He made no reply. Leaving her side he paced slowly up and down, his brow clouded, a confusion of conflicting impulses struggling with him. Should he tell her that for years he had been groping after the very truth in which she believed him to be an utter unbeliever? Should he tell her that even now his sympathies leaned more to the side of the Reformed religion than to the faith in which he had been brought up? These questions were hardly asked before they were answered. A swift recollection came to him, and his lip curled with a smile of self-pity, while in fancy he listened to her voice condemning him with a fine scorn as she had condemned Erasmus—"Poor Gaston de Rohan! he is a great man in his own estimation, and, with a grain

or two more of unselfishness he would have made a hero!" Ay, and would he not deserve the indictment, this Gaston de Rohan? Angrily he bit his lips, and the faster paced to and fro. Moreover, he asked himself, had he the right to further his cause with this innocent girl by saying what might lead her to believe him nearer her in creed than in reality he was? Would that be honourable? No, a hundred times no. Before he spoke again to her of union with him he must himself know where he stood. He must first decide this matter between himself and God. And meanwhile —he winced at the thought—meanwhile he must leave the maiden free. He had no claim upon her, no right to ask of her a pledge, and meanwhile—again he winced —meanwhile some one else might come and win her where he had failed.

Slowly he approached her where she stood, her fingers mechanically twisting and untwisting a lovely spray of azerolier berries she had plucked from the tree. She was very pale. The scarlet fruit she held gave the one touch of colour to the perfect picture of modesty and grace she made in her lover's eyes. Eager to end an interview which was becoming painful to them both, she came forward and held out her hand. "Good-bye, monsieur," she said simply. "You have been so—so kind to me. I am *very* grateful."

Taking in both of his the hand she offered, de Rohan felt it trembled. Never had she looked more beautiful, he thought, and he looked with a passion of longing into the fair face now flushing under his gaze. "Mademoiselle," he said, his voice steadying curiously at sight

of the quivering of her lips, "mademoiselle, will you give me one little proof of your gratitude—the spray of azerolier you hold?"

It seemed to her at the moment impossible to refuse the trifling petition, and she placed the bunch of fruit in his hand. He bowed his thanks; then, for greater safety, dropped the souvenir into the pocket of his doublet. "Mademoiselle," he began again, "you have said 'never.' One day—and it so please God—you will take back that word." He raised the hand he held, and, before she could prevent him, he had touched it with his lips.

Instantly she withdrew her hand and moved hurriedly forward. She had taken but a step or two in advance of him when a slight noise in the thicket behind caused her to start, as she had done on the evening before, and turn sharply round. The next instant she had sprung back and placed herself in front of de Rohan. The movement was so sudden, and apparently so inexplicable, that for a moment the young man stood bewildered. The next he was by her side, and, imagining from her look that she must be feeling ill, he was about to put his arm round her for support. But she vehemently pushed him from her. "Go back. Go back!" she called hoarsely.

"What is it?" he asked, without moving a step.

"There! there! do not you see?—do not you hear?—in the bushes?" she gasped.

To her horror de Rohan, putting her gently from him, dashed among the shadowy trees, and was out of sight in a moment. Sinking down on the moss, for

her trembling limbs were giving way beneath her, Azerole shut her eyes. There followed what seemed to her a long age of time. In reality it was not many seconds before de Rohan was again beside her. She was on her feet at once.

"Fear nothing, mademoiselle. Doubtless a stray dog or goat had wandered into the copse. Our voices had probably frightened it away. There is nothing to be seen."

"But I saw it," she whispered, trying, not altogether successfully, however, to steady her lips.

"Saw what, mademoiselle?"

"A pistol pointed through the bushes."

His face, hitherto expressive only of concern for her, now grew grave. "Are you sure, mademoiselle? Fancy plays odd tricks with us at times."

Her reply was as if she had not heard him. "I saw it! I saw it distinctly pointed through the bushes."

Her persistency impressed him; still, for her own sake, he tried to rally her out of her fears. "Then, mademoiselle, you put yourself in the way of danger by going nearer the foe."

"It was not meant for me. It was aimed at you," she replied with a shudder.

It was his turn now to be moved, but not from fear "And you thought to shield me, mademoiselle?" His voice was very low.

"Yes, monsieur," she answered simply, too agitated still to take in the full significance of her reply.

He was holding her hands in his to still their trembling, and she did not look up. Forced to yield for a

moment to the feeling of faintness which had come over her, she leant against the azerolier, and thus she did not see that the set sternness of his mouth was softened by an expression of rare gentleness, nor that his eyes, while he looked down at the woman who had risked her life for his, glowed with a light at once tender and triumphant. Her secret, the secret of her love, was his. But she had not meant him to have it, and some subtle sense of honour forbade his pressing the advantage his discovery had given him.

She was the first to break the silence. "Let us go," she urged, looking round her fearfully, for the shadowy orchard seemed peopled now with a thousand nameless terrors.

He did not attempt to persuade her to rest longer, but, helping her to wrap her shawl more closely about her, and giving her his arm, bade her lean on him. He would fain have led her on slowly, but nervous terror lent wings to her feet, and she pressed on with a feverish haste. The slight rustling made by their footsteps among the fallen leaves, the long shadows cast by the trees, were cause enough to make her start and shiver. At every turn of the path she thought she saw again the pistol pointed at Monsieur de Rohan, and—was it only her imagination? or had she not seen behind the pistol a face she knew, a face dark with the passion of a jealous hate, the face of Michel Roussier?

CHAPTER XVI

UNLOCKING THE RIDDLE

EIGHT months have passed away, and summer has come again. Very rarely, even in winter, had the weather been allowed to interfere with the Montoux' weekly expeditions to their "Bethel" in the Bois Suaire. But one Sabbath in June—the June of 1688—the rain fell so heavily all the morning that Azerole, who had just recovered from a heavy cold, feared she might for once have to remain indoors. Happily, however, the storm cleared off by midday, the sun shone out, and she was able to betake herself as usual to the tryst in the forest.

But she had not gone far before she became dimly conscious that her step lacked its usual elasticity, and that the distance seemed longer than it was wont to be. Her spirits were out of tune with her surroundings, the very brilliancy of the sunshine oppressed her, and she wondered vaguely why she did not feel more exhilarated by the freshness of the air and the loveliness of all around. June is ever a pretty month in Piedmont, and to-day the face of the country was beautiful beyond description—overhead the deep unclouded blue, and all beneath that azure vault one sparkling, glittering flash down even to the tiny blades of grass, each one bejewelled with a diamond of matchless splendour.

The sweet-scented vines were already in promising fruitage; the meadows were gay with many-coloured flowers; the woods still wore their newest and brightest attire; not a flaw in all Dame Nature's realm was to be found even by the searching rays of the sun that penetrated to the furthest depths of the woodland glades. But the rain, Azerole said to herself with a slight shiver, had left a chilliness in the air, the paths through the forest were in a soak, and her feet felt damp in spite of the sabots she had put on over her shoes. Léon, however, had arrived at the rendezvous before her, and she was soon feeling warm and cosy beside the fire he had lighted.

With her feet stretched out to the blaze, she sat and rested in a grave silence, and Léon, having brought out the Bible, glanced at her a little anxiously. He told himself that her recent cold must have pulled her down. She had grown thin and fragile in appearance, and her eyes—how large and shadowy they seemed!—surely they had not been wont to have in them that look of hungry longing?

Their little service ended, Léon, according to custom, chose a concluding psalm of praise, but to-day Azerole's voice failed her when she tried to raise the tune. "I do not know why it is, but my heart feels heavy this afternoon," she said wearily, letting her head fall on his shoulder, "and I cannot sing."

"You are not well, ma mie," he said sympathetically. "We shall not sing to-day. Next week you will feel stronger."

"It is not that. It is—it is—" she hesitated, then

resolutely driving back the words that had involuntarily risen to her lips, she hid her face on his breast. "Léon," she whispered, "do you remember that this is our mother's birthday?" And here, apparently in confirmation of his assertion that she was not well, there came a choking sob.

Léon put his arm round her. "My poor Azerole, have you, then, given up your old bright hope?"

"No, no," she cried, lifting her head. "No, no, I believe as I have ever done, that they are safe in Switzerland; but I want to go to them. Léon, I *must*. Let us follow them to Switzerland. I cannot bear my life here any longer!" Her passionate vehemence took him so much by surprise that he was silent through sheer bewilderment. "How much money have we got? Surely we must well-nigh have sufficient," she went on eagerly. "Besides our salaries, we have both made a good deal of late, you, brother, by your carved work and I by my lace."

He shook his head, but in order to satisfy her rose, and penetrating into the depths of the cave, produced the leathern pouch in which their savings were hidden. They were soon counted—one hundred and fifty crowns in all. "We want fifty more, ma mie, but patienza, patienza."

Almost fiercely she turned upon him. "We must get the fifty crowns somehow, somewhere. We must be free—free *now*—free to go away *at once*."

Léon looked at her, still wondering. "I had thought, ma mie, that you were happy now at Castel Brianza with Madame and Christophe, and——"

She interrupted him half impatiently. "Yes, yes, how can you doubt it? It is not that—it is—it is that he" —once more she checked herself, leaving her sentence, as before, unfinished.

"Ah! I see! It is Michel! He persists, does he, in annoying you? Certes, this gets beyond endurance!" exclaimed the young Vaudois, fired with sudden wrath.

Rather relieved to find that Léon had got upon the wrong tack, she took up the cue. "Without doubt Michel harasses me. I am, so to say, between two fires. If I dare venture to bestow a civil word or look upon him, he misunderstands it for more than it was meant, and if I am cold he revenges himself upon you."

"Vraiment, but it passes beyond endurance," reiterated Léon.

The girl made no response. She was struggling with an intense longing to tell her brother the real cause of her restless misery. If only she might tell him with what pain—yes, surely it was pain—she was looking forward to M. de Rohan's return to the château! He had said he would come certainly by the summer. Summer was already here, and soon he would be also! And she—how could she bear to be near him, within sight of his face, within sound of his voice? And, even if she could steel herself to endure this ordeal, was it honourable to Madame Héloise that she should remain? If Madame knew all, would not she be the first to say that the Vaudoise, the heretic barbette, must go? Oh! if she might but confide in Léon, her tower of strength in all times of difficulty and strain! Yet, had she

the right? The secret was not hers alone; it was another's. Had she the permission of that other to make it known? She let her head fall again on her brother's shoulder; her flushed cheeks paled slowly, and a thick cloud of darkness seemed to gather about her soul. Léon's voice still inveighing against Michel fell dully on her ears.

"The miserable, infatuated creature!" he muttered, in mingled scorn and indignation. "When I think of you, ma mie, I am fit to horsewhip the fellow for his impudent presumption. Yet there are times, I confess, when I could have it in my heart not only to pity but to like that wretched Michel." A flush of sudden resentment crimsoned the girl's cheeks. Truly, were she to reveal to Léon all the villainy of this same Monsieur Roussier he would scarce speak so leniently. "You see, ma mie," went on her brother deprecatingly, "the poor fool has hardly had a chance. I feel sure one would find there was more of good in him than appears, if one could but get the right side of him, and therein Hippolyte Broussel certainly has never succeeded. From what I have seen I imagine he has all along misunderstood and misjudged his nephew, who in consequence has become bitter and reckless. His indolent style of setting to work enrages the farmer, and he obstinately refuses to believe that physically Michel is weak. Monsieur Broussel is blind also to the fact that for a young man of Michel's temperament, who, unfortunately for himself, has no taste for quiet pursuits—reading and the like—the uneventful monotony of life at Malanot is intolerable. Without doubt it was a

natural enough craving for excitement that first drove him to the drinking taverns, and now their temptations are dragging him down the hill too fast for him to stop himself even if he would. I would fain hold out a helping hand, but he hates me; and, after all, there are twenty reasons why he should," concluded Léon, trying his best to smother a sigh.

But Azerole caught the sound, and it roused her slumbering excitement to fever-point. "Léon, Léon," she cried, springing to her feet, and pacing round and round the narrow limits of the cavern like a bird flinging itself against the bars of its cage. "Léon, why *must* we stay here? We cannot see one step before us now. Each day our lives—both our lives—become more and more a locked riddle to us! Only yesternight Madame Héloise heard news of the appointment of the new Prior of Lucerna. Without doubt he will be a cruel persecutor. Oh, why did God allow Prior Ugon to die? He never so much as spoke a harsh word to us. Why was he allowed to die?"

Léon shook his head. "The good God, not we, has the key to that riddle," he said quietly.

But she went on as if she had not heard. "Who can tell what trials and dangers may be in store for us now? The future looms before us like a prison-wall. Five years!—they are a lifetime! a lifetime of darkness and pain!" In the girl's voice there was a ring of despair.

Léon moved uneasily. This was the old Azerole of a year and a half ago, not the brave bright sister to whom he, man though he was, had learnt to look for help and cheering in his times of depression. She was standing

beside him now half-impatient at his silence. "Sister," he said, and his voice was grave, "methinks you are wronging our Father God." She looked at him startled. Tenderly putting his arm round her he drew her down beside him. "Chérie, it is true our lives are to us a riddle, but is it not also true that long since we told our God, the faithful God, that we would trust Him with the key?"

Azerole made no response.

"Mayhap I understand things clearer at this present," he went on, "for I think the good God put the key to a part of the riddle into my hand an hour or two ago." Léon paused a moment; his face moved out of his usual quiet. "You know that Monsieur Broussel has been ailing these past weeks. At noon to-day, when I was making him comfortable to have a nap, he said to me, 'Do you ever pray for me, my lad?' 'Yes, monsieur,' I told him, 'but to the God of the Vaudois, and to Him alone.' 'Ay, ay, my boy,' he answered steadily, 'it is Him I mean. You have taught me to believe in the Vaudois God above all Madonnas and saints and the like. Now go to your sister and pray, both of you, for an old man who needs the prayers of such as you and she.'" And then, fearful I think lest he had said too much, he turned his face to the wall. Azerole, if Hyppolyte and Justine Broussel, groping now in the dark after God, if they emerge one day into the light, what shall we, what shall I say at the end of my five years but that the God of the Vaudois has indeed paid in full the wages of His unworthy servant. And methinks, sister mine, that it was into your brave,

trusting little hand that the good God first put the key. Has it never struck you, chérie, that through the teaching of his Vaudoise governess, little Christophe is being led to the arms of his Saviour?"

Azerole's face was hidden, and for a moment or two she could not look up. Twining her arms about Léon's neck she murmured brokenly, "God bless you, brother mine. You have done more for me than you know. Whereas I was blind now I see. And may God forgive me for my lack of faith. Truly my faithlessness and our Father's forbearing love, truly they are mysteries both!"

A silence followed. At length Azerole lifted her head, and the face she turned to Leon was radiant with a victory of faith greater than he, not knowing all, was able to guess. Nor did that look of restful peace fade even when he left her at the approach to Castel Brianza, and she realised that within the walls of the château life's perplexities and burdens still awaited her. For Azerole Montoux had been gently and lovingly led by her Father in heaven into the perfect peace of her whose mind is stayed on Him.

She wondered as she walked up the avenue that Christophe did not as usual come to meet her, but, when Blaise with an unwonted alacrity threw open the gate for her, she spied the boy leaning against one of the marble pillars at the further end of the court, and by his side, looking half proud, half anxious, stood Madame Héloise.

"Ah, there is Monsieur de Beaurégard looking out for me," said Azerole, passing into the court. "But

how strange! he seems to have forgotten his crutches!" Blaise's only response was an odd chuckle.

At this moment a triumphant shout from the little cripple brought his governess to a sudden standstill; and, holding her breath, she gazed while the child, guiding his slow uncertain steps with the help of Madame de Rohan's arm on the one side and a little cane on the other, walked to meet his mademoiselle. He made a pretty picture in his crimson velvet suit, a broad collar of lace falling over his neck and shoulders, his light brown curls tossed about by the wind, and his fair little face flushed with exultant joy. In the background Jacqueline and Blaise watched the scene with speechless delight.

"Bon soir, Mademoiselle Montoux," called out Christophe gleefully, when within a yard or two of her extended arms. The next minute he threw himself upon her, and she, hardly able to speak for very gladness, clasped him close and kissed his brow.

"I knew you would be so happy," he murmured; "next to Madame Héloise I knew *you* would be glad. M. Vaux arrived after you were gone, and he said I might have my first walk to-day without any crutches from the hall door to the gate of the court and back again, and I said to Madame that assuredly we must wait for my mademoiselle."

"And Azerole mia, I have been waiting," he went on, lowering his voice so that only she might hear, "I have been waiting also for you to come for the giving of the thanks. Jacqueline said we must thank the Madonna, but I do not think thus with her, for Our Lady she

does not know Monsieur Christophe de Beaurégard of Castel Brianza in Piedmont. But God our Father, vraiment, He knows me, for it was He who made His little lame Christophe. And Jesus the Saviour, who was so kind to the little boys and girls in the long ago, *He* without doubt knows me too. And it is the good God that has made me well, for we asked Him to do it many times, you and I, n'est-ce-pas, Azerole? I knew that my mademoiselle would tell me how I could give the good God thanks, because this day I am a *real* little-man-Christophe, and can walk."

CHAPTER XVII

THE EXORCISTS OF THE BOIS SUAIRE

Gaston de Rohan, who was with his regiment in the field, did not return that summer to Piedmont. From the beginning of the campaign of 1688 he had feared it would be so, the general in command having given him flatteringly but decidedly to understand that at such a time as the present, when the whole of Europe, incited thereto by William of Orange, was preparing to oppose the pretensions of Louis of France, the army was not likely to permit the withdrawal of a young officer at once so able and so brave as monsieur the Captain de Rohan. Very rarely news from the French camp reached Castel Brianza; and, although Madame de Rohan wrote with persistent regularity, she had but the faintest hope that the letters would ever reach the front. The end of the summer found her somewhat anxious, nevertheless. Soldier's wife and soldier's mother that she was, she made no moan, but lived on from week to week on the hope which was all she had had to sustain her in former days. And if it was so that she saw her own restless uneasiness reflected in the face of her ward's governess she said no word, only treated the girl with a tender kindness more than ever like that of a mother.

One evening in the month of September Brother Thomas was sitting in the comfortable apartment he was pleased to call his cell. In his hand he held an open letter, which from time to time he consulted, while in an undertone he talked with a brother monk, like-minded with himself, if countenances speak true.

"I tell you that fellow ought to have been here by now," snapped Brother Thomas in a tone of concentrated irritation.

The younger monk took a sip from the glass of red wine he held up to the light. "He will come," he rejoined, nodding his head. "That is," he added with a leer, "if he is not too drunk. The fool is fast drinking himself into his grave."

"Apparently that is like to be the only feat he will ever accomplish within a reasonable hurry," grumbled the other. "All the same it would be somewhat more convenient if he would delay the consummation of that event until he has done this little piece of work for us." So saying, the speaker threw himself back in his chair and studied the last page of his letter, which ran thus: "Get Roussier to do the business, and promptly. I would come myself, but am occupied in laying the train at this end of the mine. You do not need me for the present, however. Roussier is all-sufficient. Tell him that Captain Gaston de Rohan is about to start for Piedmont with the intention of marrying Mademoiselle Montoux. And see to it that you keep all dark. This new prior, with his absurd scruples regarding honour and the like trash, coupled with his reprehensible aversion to the commands of Holy Mother Church in his

dealing with heretics, is not to be trusted in such a delicate affair. I——"

Brother Thomas read thus far when the sound of a heavy step was heard in the stone corridor, and the next minute Michel Roussier entered the cell. The past months had told heavily upon the young man; the hectic flush in his haggard cheeks, the stoop of his shoulders, and the short breathing, bore startling witness to the truth of Brother John's assertion.

Dispensing with the useless formality of a greeting, Michel faced his friend Thomas with an angry scowl. "Per baccho! it is without doubt the same old story—you have invited me to come to-night to hear the news that you are about to ask the prior to hurl anathemas at your one-time friend because of that confounded debt. I tell you I cannot pay it, and no amount of curses either of Church or State can get out of me the money which I do not have. Go to my uncle if you will. He can but cast me off. Eh bien," he dashed on recklessly, "life brings its changes, and, after all, it would be hard to find any change that would be for the worse for Michel Roussier," and he laughed bitterly.

"Softly, softly, mon ami. Perchance we know of a plan for delivering you from your debt and improving life's prospects in general." Brother Thomas paused, but Roussier made no response, and the monk bringing his face close to Michel, who had seated himself gloomily, whispered at some length in his ear.

The veins in Roussier's forehead swelled, and his fingers closed over the glass Brother John had pushed towards him. "But—but—I do not understand your

plan," he muttered. "You mean no harm to the demoiselle? For were it so I would not——"

"By no means, friend Roussier," was the soft-spoken assurance. "It is Mademoiselle Azerole's good we are planning. Now listen to me and I will sketch to you our little scheme. Before Captain de Rohan returns to Piedmont, Mademoiselle Montoux is to be safe in a retreat. *Where*, however, must not be known but by the few. Monsieur the Abbé Têtu has need of her services as teacher of music in the famous school of Saint Cyr. When mademoiselle has had a trial of the discipline of Madame de Maintenon's holy institution she will be given her choice either to become a nun for life or to marry Monsieur Roussier of Malanot. You know the Vaudoise, and you can guess what mademoiselle's choice will be." The monk paused, apparently to consult again the abbé's letter, in reality that he might furtively watch the face of his tool.

Roussier's colour was coming and going like a girl's, his hand shook so that the glass slipped from his grasp and fell with a crash on the floor. The younger monk rose and replaced it with another, but Michel neither heard nor saw. Starting to his feet he began to stride up and down the cell, his hands thrust deep into his girdle, his face working with suppressed excitement. Suddenly he stopped in front of Brother Thomas. "How is the thing to be managed? At night she is safe within the château. In the daytime any attempt to carry her off would be withstood even by the peasantry. They are one and all her friends."

"The Sabbath is your chance," coolly returned the

monk. "She and her brother, I am told, meet together at some hiding-place on the Sabbath afternoons. It is your business to track them."

Beads of perspiration broke out on Michel's forehead. "Per baccho!" he exclaimed, "know you that it is said they go to the Haunted Forest?"

"So much the better if that be so. The Bois Suaire will suit us admirably. I will exorcise the evil spirits for you, mon ami; that is a simple affair. Find out the haunt of the fair heretic. When the right moment arrives we shall provide you with assistants sufficient to effect her capture. Monsieur her brother is not likely to prove a dangerous obstacle. I have heard that they are rarely seen to set out together for their forest rambles. You will have her gagged and carried quite to the other side of the wood, some three miles off, and there a carriage and escort will be in waiting. The whole thing will be accomplished so quietly, so mysteriously, that none but ourselves will ever be the wiser."

Roussier wiped the drops from his brow and stood a moment in silent thought. We have already hinted that Michel Roussier was not intended for a villain. The man in him was now beginning slowly to assert itself. "You swear to me that no harm will come to mademoiselle?" he asked, looking fiercely from one to the other of the pair opposite to him.

Brother Thomas moved impatiently. "Have not I said the word, fellow. And hark you, mon ami, the work you are called to do is holy, for it is on behalf of Holy Mother Church. There will be, moreover, a goodly sum of golden crowns for yourself, and—best

reward of all—you will be the preserver of the pretty heretic's soul. For, mark you, if she marries Gaston de Rohan she will be joined to a fellow who is half-infidel half-heretic himself."

It was enough. The very name of Gaston de Rohan seemed to stir up the fiend in Michel. With a muttered imprecation he straightened himself, and held out his hand to the brothers. "Give me time, and, if the thing can be done, Michel Roussier is the man to do it," he said; whereupon, forgetful for the second time of ceremony, he strode out of the cell.

The two who were left looked at each other. "Will he fail us?" asked Brother John doubtfully.

His companion laughed. "Provided he has a sight of Mademoiselle Azerole somewhat frequently, and that he hears constantly of the speedy arrival of Monsieur de Rohan, he will not fail us."

Shortly after noon the following Sabbath Michel Roussier arrived at the outskirts of the Bois Suaire without being observed, save by a few peasant children who were leading their goats to pasture along the lonely lanes. Climbing up into a mighty chestnut tree he established himself among the topmost branches, where he could see without being seen. There he settled himself to wait, indifferent as to the length of time he might have to keep his long limbs in their cramped position. Some two hours later the sight of a slim, graceful figure approaching the wood made his heart beat fast. It was the young Vaudoise, and she entered the forest at a spot not far from his post of observation. Roussier thought he had never seen her

look more bewitching. She wore a white dress of thin shimmering stuff that fell about her in light easy folds, and the day being warm she had thrown off her mantle and was carrying it over her arm. In her other hand her bonnet swung loosely to and fro, keeping time to the slow measure of the psalm-tune she was humming softly to herself as she walked along. Her brown hair coiled loosely about her head was bound by a blue ribbon, from which a few curls had escaped, and were wandering in becoming disorder about her face and forehead.

Suddenly her unseen admirer was attracted by noticing at her throat the gleam of something crimson. A moment before at sight of her face he could have had it in his heart to go away and refuse, come what might, to have anything to do with the Abbé Têtu's schemes; but the vision of that spot of crimson hardened him to flint. It was only a spray plucked from the azerolier tree, the clustering berries showing their brilliant red against the glossy green of the leaves; but he glared at it as if he would fain tear it from her neck. For he told himself savagely that he knew for whose sake she wore it. Crushing back the imprecation that rose to his lips, he nimbly descended from the tree, and followed the girl into the wood. He did so cautiously and at some distance, however, but his passion had risen to such a height that he was carried out of himself, and he failed even to remember that he was in the Haunted Forest. He had gone about a mile when his foot caught in a bramble trail and made him stumble. Afraid lest the noise of his fall should cause made-

moiselle to look back, he lay where he had fallen for a minute or two. On regaining his feet he found to his dismay that he had lost sight of the slight figure in white flitting out and in among the intricacies of the wood. He stopped and strained his ears to catch her footfall, but it fell noiselessly on the mossy path. As if chained to the spot Michel stood motionless, and into his eyes there crept a look of terror. Overhead a storm seemed brewing, the sky had become suddenly overcast, in the forest the blackness of darkness gathered, and a stillness that might be felt filled the place, whose gloom seemed peopled with ghostly shadows gliding stealthily hither and thither, but ever drawing nearer to him, until he fancied he could feel their poisonous breath in his face.

A cold sweat broke out upon his forehead, and he leant against a tree, his limbs shaking under him. He would return, he said to himself, as soon as he was able to collect his shuddering thoughts. The Abbé Têtu must find another to do his work; it was not Michel Roussier who could go a step further in this spirit-accursed wood. With an effort he pulled himself erect, and was preparing to retrace his steps when he caught sight of something red lying just at the entrance to a path some little way ahead of him. Some impulse impelled him to go on to reach that spot of crimson. A minute or two more and he was grasping the spray of azerolier which had dropped from the dress of its owner. For a moment he gazed at his prize, then dashing it to the ground, stamped it under his foot. Looking up he fancied he saw, but now in the far dis-

tance, the shimmer of Azerole's dress, and once more with feverish haste he set off in pursuit. But he lost time through taking a wrong path, and when at last the precipices overhanging the dry bed of the old torrent was reached, Michel, to his chagrin, found that the Vaudoise was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared as completely as if the ground had opened and swallowed her. Considerably discomfited, Roussier, after waiting some time longer in the hope of Léon's appearing, was forced to the conclusion that he must already have arrived at the secret trysting-place. Consequently, the threatened storm having spent itself in a short sharp shower of rain, the spy was perforce obliged to beat a crestfallen retreat.

The following Sabbath morning he provided himself with a supply of food, and walked to the Bois Suaire, succeeding, though not without considerable difficulty, in finding his way through the dense wood to the old river-bed. There, in a rocky cleft concealed by brushwood, he hid and waited. But his mood had altered somewhat since we saw him last. An incident which had happened a day or two after his first visit to the Haunted Forest had, as he impatiently told himself, weakened his spirit. And now, lying with his face upturned to the pure white clouds that flitted so noiselessly across the deep blue, he upbraided himself for being at heart "naught but a miserable poltroon."

The long hours passed, but at length his patience was rewarded, and he had the satisfaction of seeing first Léon and then Azerole emerge from the wood, descend the steep cliff leading to the dry bed of the torrent, and

disappear within a narrow opening between the high rocks on the opposite side of the stream. It took him quite half-an-hour to reach by a circuitous path the top of the long ridge of grey gneiss above the cavern, and, thoroughly exhausted with the climb, he lay down to rest and consider what was best to do next. All unknown to him his head was on a level with the hole in the roof of the haunted cave through which in winter the smoke from the fire was wont to make its escape. Suddenly he started on hearing beneath him the sound of a voice he knew. It was Léon's. Michel rubbed his hands together, and chuckled inwardly. Now he would find out whether this was a weekly rendezvous, or merely an accidental trysting-place. He crept closer to the aperture, and laid his ear against it.

"Léon"—this time it was another voice that reached him, and its clear tones made him thrill all over. "Léon, I saw Michel last week at Malanot. Poor fellow, he looks so ill, and so unhappy. It made my heart ache to see him thus. You wonder, mayhap, at my change of mood, but in truth, Léon, it is God I feel assured that has wrought the change in me. Ever since we began to pray for Michel, you and I together, there has been more of pity than anger in my heart towards him. Ah, if he would but be content to let me be his sister, how glad I should be to care for him!" Léon's response Michel did not catch. There was a moment's pause, then he heard Azerole's voice again, but this time she was not speaking to her brother. "Oh, our Father in heaven, we ask Thee again to show us what we can do for poor Michel. Help us to overcome

evil with good. Make him willing to believe that for the dear Lord Jesus Christ's sake we would fain be his friends."

With a muttered oath Michel rose to his feet. The sweat was on his brow and his tired limbs were unsteady, but he descended and ascended the face of the rocks with a swiftness that, at another time, he could not have believed possible, and, dashing into the wood, hurried through its shadowy depths as if the spirit of the fratricide himself were in close pursuit. And truly there were spirits good and evil following on the heels of Michel Roussier, each in desperate earnest, bent upon outrunning the other in the race. Which would win?

He had not gone far when, impelled by some subtle influence outside his own will, he retraced his steps, and once more mounted to his place of concealment among the boulders on the top of the cliff. Crouching there within sound of the voices in the cavern below, there crept over him an indefinable sense of having escaped, for the moment at least, from his worst self.

Léon had been strangely silent, even for him, that afternoon in the cave. Had he suspected the near neighbourhood of the foe lurking out of sight among the rocks overhead, he could scarcely have conducted their little service with a face more grave and preoccupied. When it was over and the last note of their hymn of praise had died away in weird sobbing breaths among the distant recesses of the cavern, he rose without a word and put away the Bible, returning with the bag in which they kept their store of money. Azerole looked surprised, for neither of them had brought any-

thing that day to add to their savings. Very carefully he counted over their hoard, then with a muttered "I thought so," replaced the coins in the pouch. "Azerole," he said, looking at her a little strangely, "you wondered when God would begin to answer our prayer that He would permit us to help Michel. Methinks it may be"—the lad's voice grew slower—"it may be the answer has come even now." In the fading light Azerole could not see her brother's expression, but she could hear the distress in his tone. "I have tried to put it from me, but it returns again and again, most of all when I try to pray. It is for your sake, ma mie, that I am troubled, more even than for myself. I had almost had it in my heart to wish that God had not answered our prayer—or at least not in this way." Without speaking, Azerole laid her hand upon his. The sympathy in the mute action gave him courage, and, realising that he was keeping her in suspense, he went on hurriedly. "It was two nights ago that Michel—you know his bed-chamber is next to mine—was taken with one of his attacks of pain. I did what I could for him, and the pain in time wore off. Still he continued terribly restless, tossing and moaning aloud, for he now thought himself alone. I began to think there was mental trouble as well, and, returning to his bedside, hinted as much, when he broke down sobbing like a child. Soon I had the truth out of him. He had been gaming hard of late and was heavily in debt. We talked the matter over, and he actually let me speak my mind. I could see that within his better self there was a longing to have done with the old life, a poor,

pitiful yearning after something nobler. But this wretched debt was a halter round his neck chaining him to all the old evil influences. I asked him how much it was. Two hundred crowns, he said. Azerole, our hoard amounts to one hundred and sixty."

There was a long silence. With her head buried in her hands, Azerole sat motionless. She did not know that she prayed, but she did. She was repeating bewilderingly the words of Léon's prayer of a few minutes ago, asking that God would show them His will with regard to Michel Roussier, and help them to do it, however hard. "Hard!" the word seemed to mock her by its feebleness to describe what this sacrifice would mean for her and Léon. As if he had guessed her thoughts, or, it might be, had arrived himself at the same point in the steep road they were trying to climb, Léon murmured, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Then she spoke out the bitterness of the doubt that was torturing her. "Léon, I believed that God was helping us to gather this money for our own freedom. Surely He would not mock us at the last by snatching it away from us?"

Léon sighed. He had hoped that questioning thought would not assail his sister, and for a long minute or two he was silent, uncertain how to express the comfort that had been vouchsafed to himself. "Certes," he began at last, "it seems to us mysterious, little sister, and yet——"

The sentence was never finished, for Azerole, with one of her bravest smiles, looked up. "Shame on me to have forgotten, and that so soon again, that it is

our Father, God Himself, who has the key to this riddle also! We can wait for Him to unlock it in His own good time. Give Michel the money, and if it be the means of showing him that through the Vaudois religion he has a brother and a sister in you and me, then our sacrifice will not be thrown away."

Low though the speaker's sweet tones were they reached a listening ear overhead, where Roussier was now struggling fiercely with his tears, tears the like of which he had not shed since he was a soft-hearted, innocent child.

Late that night, when the household at Malanot had gone to rest, Léon crept softly to the room next his own and offered Roussier the hundred and sixty crowns from himself and his sister. Michel, who was in bed, was gruff and unresponsive. "Vraiment, but I am obliged to you both," was all he said, and resolutely kept his face turned to the wall. Léon, going disappointed away, had hard work to crush down the thought that, after all, the sacrifice had been in vain.

The following morning Roussier rode over to Lucerna and presented himself before his friends at the monastery. They were expecting him to come and report progress, and he was welcomed with effusive cordiality. Affecting not to see their sign to him to be seated, Michel remained standing. In his hand he carried a leathern bag, and opening it, showed its glittering contents to Brother Thomas. "There are two hundred crowns. Give me a receipt and you shall have them," he said shortly.

To a nature as grasping as that of Brother Thomas

the mere sight of gold is irresistible. He scrawled a few words on a piece of paper, and clutching the money, counted it with greedy carefulness.

Straightening himself Michel faced the pair. "And now, messieurs, perchance this is the best moment to tell you that you must needs get some one other than Michel Roussier to do your dirty work." Spreading out his hands he looked at them in a curious way. "Some days agone you spoke of holy services to be rendered to Holy Mother Church, friend Thomas. Bene, for the present at least I have the fancy to keep clean hands for holy work." And with that he bowed and was gone.

As the door closed behind him Brother John, his face black with rage, looked at his companion. "How now, mon ami, have you spoilt the game with your confounded greed?"

The other laughed. "Fear naught," he chuckled. "He will be ten times deeper in debt in a week. And then terror of you and me will modify his terror of the evil spirits in the Bois Suaire. Give him time, my son, give him time."

Michel Roussier paid no more Sabbath visits to the Haunted Cave. He shrank from returning, not, however, as Brother Thomas imagined, because of a superstitious horror of the spirits that haunted the place, but because the man in him was slowly but surely waking into life, and it revolted against playing the spy upon those who were his friends.

The weeks passed on, and the two Montoux continued to meet as usual at their tryst without a sus-

picion that it had been discovered, or that there was need for greater precaution than formerly. One afternoon in December Azerole, having lit a fire in the cavern, stood at the entrance looking out for Léon, who was later than was his wont. He came at last, and in an amazement she watched him dash down the cliff-side and across the boulders in the river-bed with a daring recklessness that betokened something unusual had carried him out of himself. At sight of Azerole he waved his hat, and, for the moment, forgetful of his wonted caution, shouted aloud. But not until he came nearer did she catch the words, "Good news, ma mie! Great news! Grand news!"

"Our parents!" she gasped.

"Ay, that too will come! All in good time," he returned confidently. Drawing her within the cave he put his arm round her. "Chérie," he said, answering the question in her eyes, "chérie, our exiles are coming home!" Azerole started and gave a little cry. "It is true," he went on, in hurried disjointed sentences. "It is all the talk in Lucerna, where Michel heard it yesternight. It is a proof of Roussier's more kindly feeling that he brought me the news secretly. It seems, so they told him in the town, that so long agone as last June an attempt was made by a brave band of our people under the leadership of Pastor Henri Arnaud to make their escape from their friendly jailors in Switzerland. The expedition failed, and there was great laughter among the Catholics when the news came. They swear another such attempt will end the same. But it will not!" cried Léon, his eyes kindling.

"It is the beginning, not the end, as they imagine. Henri Arnaud is a great man. Under God he will accomplish the return of the Vaudois. As soon as the winter snows have melted on the Alps they will set out on their march to take possession once more of their valleys. And they will succeed, for the God of the Vaudois will fight for them; He will fight with them. Azerole, do you hear? The Vaudois are returning!"

But the girl was utterly unable as yet to grasp the magnitude of the news. She bowed her head, but her lips refused to speak.

Taking both her hands in his, Léon said, with a choking voice: "Azerole, little sister, do you not understand? The riddle for them—our people, aye, and, please God, for our long-lost dear ones—for them the riddle is unravelling."

At the words the quick colour rushed into the girl's cheeks. "And for us too, Léon," she whispered, awed by the thought that had come to her. "Ah, we see it now! It was because our Father knew we should not need our money for ourselves that He asked us to give it all to Michel!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A FOOL AND HIS FOLLY

In the valley of Mégève, at the foot of the Col Joli, the early morning air on the 19th of August 1689 was intensely cold. But, heedless of the icy keenness of the wind that blew across the snow-capped peaks of the Alps, towering above and around them, two soldiers stood confronting each other in a narrow defile. At either end of the pass a couple of Vaudois scouts remained on guard, their watchful eyes following every movement of the younger of the two men, a French officer they had arrested as a spy and brought before their chief.

The latter, a man of powerful and noble physique, looked what history has painted him, a king among men. One had but to glance at the eagle eye, the resolute mouth, the air of command, to recognise in this Vaudois pastor and captain a born leader of hosts. Nor is it too much to say that Henri Arnaud, the organiser and general of the memorable enterprise known as the "Glorieuse Rentrée," was by his personal courage, his military abilities and manly piety, the inspiration of the heroic band of nine hundred Vaudois exiles who, in the summer of 1689, after three years of banishment from their beloved valleys, made their

escape from the kind land of their adoption and crossed the Alps, undaunted by indescribable hardships, hair-breadth escapes, and fierce encounters with the enemy who lay in ambush for them at every turn. Little wonder, however, if the spirits of Arnaud's followers rose after each engagement with the foe, albeit so superior—in what the world calls superiority—to the untrained, inexperienced little army of the Vaudois. For had not the God of battles shown Himself from the first to be on the side of the "Israel of the Alps"? Had not He already done wonders on their behalf? Were not their numbers swelled by the many illustrious prisoners which from time to time had fallen into their hands? Nevertheless they had need to be on their guard, no less against treacherous spies than against open foes, and the four scouts had but done their duty in seizing and disarming as a "suspect" this Frenchman, notwithstanding that he had in reply to their challenge answered "Friend." After blindfolding their captive they had conducted him, where indeed he wished to go, into the presence of their general.

The young officer's noble bearing and frankness of speech were calculated to disarm suspicion, and Arnaud felt himself irresistibly attracted. Nevertheless he did not fail to observe his habitual caution.

"Your interest in the Vaudois must be great indeed, monsieur, since it has prompted you to make such a fatiguing détour in order to warn us heretic barbets that by taking the mountain pass at Bonhomme, where you say the fortifications erected but a year agone to

oppose us have now been abandoned, we should escape the ambushment lying in wait for us at the other side." There was a touch of doubt in the speaker's tone, and the Frenchman flushing, instinctively drew himself still more erect. "Pardon me," said Arnaud somewhat hastily, "I feel assured that in mistrusting you I am wronging you, monsieur. But I pray you to remember that I have the lives of eight hundred faithful followers depending—under God—on my judgment. For their sakes I have no right to risk a false step."

The other frankly held out his hand, which Arnaud grasped with a cordiality he could not have explained to himself. "You have the right to suspect me, monsieur. You have the right also to ask for proofs of my sincerity. I have none to give. For explanation of my presence here I must in a sentence confide to you a little piece of my personal history. My name is Gaston de Rohan, captain in the French army. During the campaign of last year I was wounded and left for dead near a village in the north of Wirtemberg. There, as without doubt you are aware, there is a small colony of your compatriots, Monsieur General. By one of them I was found, taken to a Vaudois pastor's humble home, and tended with a disinterested devotion I am not likely ever to forget. The German physician told me bluntly I was a dying man, and—and—well, Monsieur Arnaud, to me the future was naught but the dark unknown. My new friends with all tenderness, yet with all faithfulness, pointed me to Him who is the God of the Vaudois. Long months agone I had heard of that same God, and of His Fatherhood through

Jesus Christ, from the lips of two of the children of your valleys, monsieur, and now in my extremity I called upon Him. In His mercy He hearkened to my cry and sent an answer of peace to my soul. Monsieur Arnaud, the debt I owe to your countrymen and—countrywomen," the speaker lingered a moment on the last word, "I can never repay. But I should be unworthy of the unsullied name I bear if, when the opportunity presented itself, I did not try to express in deeds my gratitude. Yesternight I lay in a little inn at Salenches. Through a hole in the flooring of my bedroom I overheard the conversation of a party of reckless Piedmontese soldiers in the room below, who unwittingly revealed to me your near neighbourhood and danger, and, escaping from the house under cover of the darkness, I bribed a peasant to act as my guide to the ridge of Bonhomme. My men-at-arms were not to be trusted. I left them behind at Salenches. That is wherefore I am alone and unattended."

Arnaud wrung the hand he held. "And you, my friend?" he demanded anxiously. "I greatly misdoubt me but your generous aid has been tendered at no little risk to yourself, Monsieur de Rohan. This act of yours—unpardonable, mark you, in the eyes of our foes and your friends—makes it impossible for you to return to Salenches to pick up your men-at-arms, and without guide or escort your position is hardly an enviable one."

Gaston shrugged his shoulders. "Certes, were I a free agent I should be greatly tempted to throw in my lot with you and your brave band, monsieur," he said with his pleasant smile, then shook his head at sight of

the other's eager gesture of welcome. "Nay, then, monsieur pasteur, but unfortunately I shall not be my own master until I have delivered to the commandant of the garrison at Pinerolo an important despatch with which I am entrusted. Save for that I should have joined you right gladly, and counted it an honour to do so, for, believe me, the heart of Gaston de Rohan is knit with that of Henri Arnaud in this glorious enterprise. I am well aware, moreover, that with you and your heroic eight hundred I should be saved from immediate peril, but such a course is not mine to take, if I be minded at the same time to keep my honour." And throwing aside his military cloak he tapped the breast of his doublet significantly. The action disclosed what Arnaud was quick to see, namely, that the young officer's right arm hung limp and nerveless from his shoulder. "Ah!" Gaston lightly responded in answer to the other's glance of concern, "it would appear that Captain de Rohan has an unlucky power of attracting the flying bullets, voilà tout." ("The better the soldier the better the target," muttered Arnaud to himself.) "Whether I shall recover the use of this valuable limb is doubtful, but at least it has gained for me a long-wished-for furlough, and from Pinerolo I shall be at liberty to make my swift way *homewards*." The last word was uttered with a lingering intonation that was not lost on his sympathetic hearer. Before he could reply, the young man, to whom the thought of "home" had recalled something, went on to ask, "Monsieur Arnaud, perchance you may happen to know the fate of a little family of exiles in whom I am interested—I

refer to one Pastor Montoux and his family, who it is believed escaped to Switzerland——"

The Vaudois interrupted him. "François Montoux? Vraiment, the man who is my colleague, dear as a brother, faithful as——"

It was Gaston's turn to break in. "Comment? Here? In the camp with you?"

The other nodded. "But at present absent on a foraging expedition not to return till nightfall." De Rohan's face fell. "His wife and little daughter are not in Switzerland but in the duchy of Wirtemberg, probably not far distant from where you lay invalided." The older man was fain to smile at the younger's stamp of unreasonable impatience with himself, so oddly did it contrast with the fervent "Thank God!" which the next instant burst from his lips.

There followed a hurried talk between the two, and the big heart of Henri Arnaud was greatly moved when he realised the magnitude of the good tidings it would be his joy to bear to Pastor Montoux concerning his long-lost children. But only for a brief moment did the Vaudois leader permit himself to dwell upon this or any other topic outside Monsieur de Rohan himself. Mindful of the Frenchman's present danger, Arnaud urged his departure, warning him there was only too great a probability of his Savoyard guide breaking faith. Signalling to two of the waiting scouts he rapidly explained the situation to them, and ordered the men to conduct de Rohan down the pass to the spot where the young officer had left his horse. For a few moments Henri Arnaud watched the rapidly re-

treating figures of Gaston and his guides, then with his head bent in deep thought he strode through one defile after another until he had gained his headquarters in the Vaudois camp.

At one of the camp-fires round which a group of prisoners were drying their wet clothes before the cheerful blaze, Captain Arnaud paused, and addressing one of the hostages with the courtesy he habitually showed to his captives, he inquired whether perchance M. Mercier had ever heard of a French officer by name de Rohan.

"De Rohan? Captain Gaston de Rohan?" echoed the prisoner with a contemptuous laugh. "Comment, Monsieur General! but all the world knows Gaston de Rohan to be one of the greatest fools in France."

"Your brother then, Mercier!" laughed a comrade, who apparently took his ill-fated circumstances philosophically. "Just a minute ago it was yourself whom you described as a gigantic fool to have left la belle France to fall into a Vaudois trap on the high Alps."

"It would oblige me, Monsieur Mercier," said Arnaud quietly, "if you would explain why you, along with all France, call M. de Rohan a fool. The lives of this party may depend upon the rightness or wrongness of your assertion."

Monsieur Mercier shrugged his shoulders. "I dare say you and I, Monsieur General, may differ as to the rightness and wrongness of the title. We look at most things from opposite sides, n'est-ce-pas? Eh bien, Gaston de Rohan comes of a good Dauphiné family, one of the oldest in France, and one of the richest to boot. The

family estates are enormous. During our young captain's absence with the army in the field—where, by the way, rumour has it he has repeatedly distinguished himself—some evil-intentioned persons took the opportunity to dispute the question of his lawful succession to the lands in Dauphiné, upon the plea that his father had been both traitor and heretic, and had only escaped excommunication and a military execution by dying before the court-martial had time to convict him. For my part, I do not believe the foul-mouthed liars. Among all the brave knights of France there was none braver, none truer than Bayard, Major de Rohan, and I have the right to say so, for I knew him well. I did hear a whisper of his having shown the soft heart to the Huguenots, but that is an old story now, and need not have been remembered against him or his. If at the present crisis young de Rohan had exhibited even one small grain of worldly wisdom all might have gone well; but—ma foi!—what can you make of a fool? Even the shrewd Abbé Têtu's little scheme to reinstate his young relative in the good graces of Mother Church failed of success. The abbé, who is high in favour with Madame de Maintenon, albeit rumour has it he has a rival now in the person of the Bishop of Lyons, eh bien, Monsieur Têtu gave it as his opinion to Madame that, whatever Gaston de Rohan's father might have been, monsieur the gallant captain was himself a faithful son of the Church. All that was needed, quoth the pious abbé, was that monsieur his cousin should be asked in the presence of witnesses to swear to his loyalty to the Church. Thereafter—

and to this Madame, on behalf of the king, agreed—the whole affair should be at an end. But——"

"But what?" sharply demanded Arnaud, as Mercier burst into a loud laugh.

"What, indeed? Ma foi! but would you believe it, our young captain would not swear? Was there ever, I demand of you, such a fool? And that——"

"And that," interposed Henri Arnaud, finishing the sentence with quiet irony, "that is the man, the fool I should say, to whose folly we all, ay, and you likewise, Monsieur Mercier, owe our lives to-day."

CHAPTER XIX

THE PRISONER IN THE VELVET MASK

"HOLÀ! Who goes there? Halt!" The sharp, imperative tone of command suddenly changed, and the order to surrender was followed by a volley of exclamations, ending in the amazed "Gaston de Rohan! as I am an angry man! Where in the name of thunder and lightning did you drop from?"

"From the same sky, I make no doubt, that thundered and lightened you from the clouds, Major de Brissac," replied Gaston, airily concealing as best he could his annoyance at this *rencontre* with a detachment of his most Catholic Majesty's troops on the high-road to Susa.

"Eh bien, that *you* of all men should turn up here and now proves that my lucky star must have been in the ascendant after all this morning. I and my men are in the worst of tempers, and small wonder. Have we not been lying in wait all day on the heights above the pass of Bonhomme, our bodies freezing with cold, our souls boiling with disappointment and rage? We had planned to have fine sport bringing down big game in the shape of a band of heretic Vaudois, but—peste! instead of walking into the trap our Piedmontese cousins had prepared for them, the birds—warned

by some traitor, I warrant—took mountain exercise elsewhere. Our colonel's amiability, a trifle soured already, will not be improved by the news we are on our way to report, and some of us, I wot not, will be glad enough that you are at hand to try on him your old powers of sweetening other folks' acidity. Vraiment, but it *is* odd that we should meet, you and I, and here of all places! And you appear to be alone, mon ami. What freak is this?"

De Rohan briefly explained his errand to Pinerolo, passing lightly over the trifling circumstance of his having chosen to leave his men-at-arms behind at Salenches, whereupon the lively major, signing to his company to fall in behind, led the way towards the town of Susa, some two miles off. *En route* de Brissac rattled on in a ceaseless flow of talk, now railing against the barbets for succeeding in giving him the slip, now indiscreetly confiding to his old comrade of the military school in Paris the cause of Monsieur the Colonel de Vardes' present fit of accentuated ill-humour. "We were taking a state prisoner, a veritable man-in-the-iron-mask, to the citadel of Pinerolo," he explained, "and as ill-luck would have it, the inconvenient fellow must needs die yesternight for no reason on earth that can be discovered, voyez vous? The prisoner, that I will admit, did not carry the civilest of tongues in his head; add to that fact this other, that our worthy colonel has a volcano of a temper, and—que voulez vous?" De Brissac shrugged his shoulders expressively. "There will be a fine stir in Paris when the thing is known, and Monsieur le Colonel is fit to tear,

not his own hair, which would be fitting, but the feelings of his affectionate sympathisers. True, there are but three of us in the secret as yet; but, ma foi! these state skeletons are not given to keeping decently in their cupboards."

De Rohan listened without hearing. Truth to tell his mind was much perturbed over the situation in which he now found himself, a position of affairs brought about, he was forced to acknowledge, by his own carelessness. He had been riding hard all day, but at last, feeling secure in the knowledge that he had left far behind him the Piedmontese troops who were in pursuit of the Vaudois, he had under cover of the gathering dusk yielded to a sense of physical weariness, and slackened speed. Allowing the reins to hang loosely on the neck of his good steed, he had fallen into a reverie, his thoughts strangely mixed. Now they were grave as he reflected that perchance by this time, if the worthy Alphonse Têtu had succeeded in his cousinly machinations, Gaston de Rohan was a disinherited, and what in those days was still worse, an excommunicated man, and, in consequence, an exile from the land of his birth; anon they were glad with a gladness nothing could quench as he realised his nearness to those who were dearer to him than lands, or fame, or even the esteem of his fellow-men. De Brissac's voice had roused him somewhat rudely to the discovery that he had inadvertently left the unfrequented by-path he had been pursuing, and had wandered into the highroad. And now, while he was returning random monosyllables by way of reply to

his friend's volubility, he was schooling himself to play his part when face to face with Colonel de Vardes, a man whom he knew by name to be a military martinet as well as a bigoted churchman.

Arrived at Susa, de Rohan was introduced by de Brissac to his commanding officer, and by him was at once invited to mess that evening at the best inn of which the little town could boast. At supper, as Gaston had only too surely foreseen, the subject of conversation was divided between the fortunes of the French arms in the Palatinate and these miscreant Vaudois, and the slip they had given Monsieur de Brissac that day. Plans were laid for still more effectively circumventing the exiles, and again and again Captain de Rohan was called upon for the benefit of his experience and counsel. It was not possible that his unresponsiveness and evasions could long escape notice, and Gaston could hardly be said to be taken aback by the keen thrust of the colonel, "Monsieur de Rohan, your reticence strikes me as unpatriotic. Henri Arnaud himself could scarce observe a more prudent demeanour were the proceedings of the runaway barbets being under discussion in his presence."

The words were spoken courteously, but with an underlying tone of suspicion. De Rohan was saved from the necessity of a reply, for at that moment there came a sudden interruption. An unceremonious knock at the door was followed by the hasty entrance of a sergeant. Saluting, he hurriedly apologised for his intrusion, the cause of which he was eager to explain. "Monsieur colonel, we have without doubt found the

traitor who gave warning to the barbets at the pass of Bonhomme. It is one Paul Ramier, the bugle-master's son. He was missing from headquarters yesternight, lost his way on the mountains he declares, but refuses to give any account of himself. He has all along been suspected by some of our men of being in league with this devil's agent Henri Arnaud and his band. We have had him arrested and put in irons. What may be your orders, monsieur colonel?"

The colonel, never in the best of humours at any time, was irritated at the very mention of the contemptible foe who had contrived to outwit his military tactics. It was a relief to have some one at last on whom he could legitimately wreck his spleen. "Let him be shot on the morrow's morn at daybreak, sergeant. It were well to teach the men a lesson. If what I hear be true, there are other malcontents in the camp."

The sergeant, saluting again, was about to withdraw, when Gaston started to his feet. "Halt!" he cried. His face was pale, but he stood erect, his hand on his sword, his head thrown back, his eye fearless. "Messieurs, you have got the wrong man. It was I, Gaston de Rohan, who gave warning to Monsieur Henri Arnaud of the ambush that had been laid for him. I did not know then that it was this distinguished company I was circumventing, but the knowledge would have made naught of difference to my action."

A dead silence followed upon this bold speech. Under his breath de Brissac, furiously twisting his moustache, had muttered, "Fool! Could he not have

held his tongue?" The remaining officers, two young lieutenants who had found themselves greatly attracted by de Rohan, looked uneasily at the major. Sergeant Soubise, a savage-tempered fellow of whom even the fiery colonel stood somewhat in awe, smiled sardonically. "Monsieur colonel, there is no further need, I presume, for the irons, or—or—the execution on the morrow. I have your leave to withdraw, monsieur?"

A scowl darkened the face of the commanding officer, who was heated with wine and anger combined. "The scoundrel thinks I am afraid to meddle with a de Rohan," he muttered wrathfully to himself, for the half sneer in the sergeant's voice had stung him. "Hold there, varlet!" he shouted. "In truth there is need of both. The irons now, and—the—execution at daybreak will be reserved for monsieur the Captain Gaston de Rohan."

De Brissac changed colour. So did the lieutenants. Colonel de Vardes saw that in his hurry to assert himself he had gone too far; but he was too small a man to withdraw merely because mercy had sounded the retreat.

"Comment!" he roared in rising fury. "Insubordination, messieurs?"

De Brissac stepped forward. "Monsieur le Colonel, your inferior officers know their places better than to oppose the authority of their illustrious chief, whose very name in France is synonymous with judgment and valour." Colonel de Vardes was very susceptible of tactful flattery, and his rage was somewhat mollified. "It would be gross presumption for any of us to dictate

to an officer of your rank and renown, and it is only upon the plea of my being an old schoolmate of that fool there," glancing with supreme contempt at Gaston, who stood opposite with folded arms, "that I venture to interfere with a trifling suggestion."

"Eh bien, and what may it be that you would propose, major?" demanded his superior. "That we should let him go free to do us a further mischief?"

De Brissac shrugged his shoulders. "Ma foi, no! Vraiment, but he has had his turn, now it is ours. Let him take the late prisoner Fouquet's berth at Pinerolo. It will save us from an awkward dilemma that he should personate our Man-in-the-Velvet-Mask. Let him swear—and let it be remembered, messieurs, that men of his eccentric stamp never break their word of honour—that he will with scrupulous care wear the steel visor, that he will never without permission of his jailor reveal his identity in the citadel until such time as his most Christian Majesty shall appoint, and to this end that he will pass himself off under another name."

Involuntarily three pairs of eyes were turned upon Gaston. Truth to tell none in the room, from the surly colonel downwards, but would be relieved if de Brissac's plan of extricating them from a most embarrassing situation was proved practicable. In spite of the trick he had played them, de Rohan had gained their liking and esteem, and in their hearts none of them wished him ill. Moreover, and this fact Colonel de Vardes was not too drunk to see, the major's proposal would, as he had said, save the company from the consequences of its colonel's hot-headed rashness in cross-

ing swords with a prisoner of State. Strange to say de Vardes did not seem to entertain a moment's doubt as to the inviolability of Gaston de Rohan's word of honour. Stranger still perhaps, unless the wine he had drunk be taken into account, he failed to observe that the major's cunningly worded conditions left the prisoner in the citadel of Pinerolo free to make his escape if circumstances favoured the attempt.

"Gentlemen," said Gaston, bowing first to the colonel and then to the others, "I appreciate to the full the consideration which has been shown to me. I pledge myself to abide by the restrictions laid down by Major de Brissac and approved of by Monsieur le Colonel de Vardes. Doubtless, however," and he bowed again, this time somewhat anxiously, "doubtless, monsieur, you will permit me to acquaint my relatives of my well-being. They——"

"Most assuredly no, monsieur captain," thundered the commanding officer. "Ma foi! no, unless we would have all France, headed by your vassals of the Les Rochers de Rohan, roused to find the missing lord of the château."

Not considering it was necessary for him to enlighten the angry speaker with regard to the fact of his relatives being nearer at hand than Les Rochers de Rohan, Gaston remained silent.

At a sign from de Brissac the sergeant had gone in search of the disguise worn by their deceased prisoner. He now returned with it, a black velvet mask with steel springs at the chin which enabled the wearer to eat without removing the visor. Stepping up to de Rohan,

de Brissac adjusted the mask, murmuring as he did so: "Keep quiet. The Vaudois dispersed, you will be set at liberty. I shall have information conveyed to the Abbé Têtu. He is high in favour, I understand, with Madame de Maintenon, and will speedily arrange matters, you will see."

De Rohan's smile struck his friend oddly. "Yes, mon ami," returned the prisoner gravely, "I shall see."

CHAPTER XX

WAITING

All through the autumn and winter succeeding Gaston de Rohan's imprisonment in the citadel of Pinerolo the hearts of two women in the great lonely old château of Brianza grew sick with longing for news of the absent one for whom they waited and watched in vain. His mother had duly received a letter telling of his recovery from the illness consequent upon his second wound, and later had come a messenger announcing monsieur the captain's return to Piedmont on furlough. But the days and the weeks passed on bringing nothing but silence, and with the silence a suspense the pair in the château hardly knew how to bear. A common sorrow drew Madame Héloise and her ward's governess very close together as the days went by. It had come suddenly to Azerole that Madame had guessed her secret; and, when the first nervous tremor consequent upon this knowledge was over, she realised with a quick throb of gladness that her kind benefactor's growing tenderness would not have been possible had the discovery she had made occasioned her even a momentary displeasure. Nevertheless, as if by a tacit consent, both were silent upon a subject which neither

seemed to have the courage just then to broach to the other.

At the entreaty of Madame de Rohan, Signor Bocelli, the advocate at Turin, had gone to Paris with the hope of obtaining some intelligence concerning the mysterious disappearance of Captain Gaston de Rohan. The report he brought back was scarcely a reassuring one, although it was softened with all the plausibility, evasion, and subterfuge of which only a warm-hearted Italian knows the art to perfection. From the Abbé Têtu he had ascertained that Captain de Rohan was just then unfortunately not too high in favour at the court of Versailles. It was known that he had left the army suddenly and somewhat under a cloud, and it was believed that he was now in retirement, having been advised to efface himself from public notice for a time until the little scandal—a foolish quarrel with the Church—should have blown over. "In a few weeks the sky will be clear, and we shall have Monsieur Gaston home," quoth the signore cheerily.

But the weeks dragged themselves out into months, and still he did not come. "It is the curse that is on the house of de Rohan," Madame Héloise would mutter to herself at times, not thinking that she spoke aloud, and Azerole, overhearing the words, would shiver with a sense of nameless dread, and for the rest of the day would wander aimlessly from room to room of the château with a half-scared face, treading noiselessly as when death has entered a house.

Throughout these first weeks of waiting the girl was hardly herself; and Jacqueline, who watched over

mademoiselle with only a degree less of devotion than that which she bestowed upon her beloved mistress, feared the girl was falling sick. But it was not so, and ere long Azerole roused herself and went about her daily duties with a quiet courage that bore bright witness to the truth of the promise, "My grace is sufficient for thee, My strength is made perfect in weakness." True, there were times when in the quiet of her own room she would take herself to task for the nervous restlessness which she could not always control, and she would with shame reproach herself for ingratitude. "Is it then possible that I can be other than full of joy and thankfulness to our Father God?" she would ask indignantly while she walked the floor in the darkness of the night. "On that never-to-be-forgotten day in August when Léon, half delirious with joy, brought me the news of the Rentrée Glorieuse, the news that our exiles had returned, that they were in the Valleys; and later, when he had actually seen my dear father and learnt that our precious mother and little Stella were safe in Wirtemberg, I thought my heart would break, for the weight of happiness seemed more than I could bear. And now but a few weeks have gone, and my heart is heavy with a weight of sadness. And hélas! I can neither understand it nor shake it off!"

At this point a burst of tears would inevitably come to the relief of the poor child, and ere long a sense of peace would steal over her spirit, with the remembrance that she was free to weep her heart out before her Father God, who understood though she did not, and

who never failed to give comfort liberally and without upbraiding. Then, when she was calm again, she would tell herself, with a pathetic attempt to hide the real truth from her shrinking consciousness, that there was but little wonder if at times she felt anxious and troubled. Almost immediately following the news of the return of the Vaudois, had come the intelligence that Pastor Montoux had been taken by the enemy and sent to prison in Turin. And, in addition to this sorrow, she was suffering under a further trial in the loss of the brother who had been for these past four years her pillar of strength. Not only with the cordial consent of the Broussels and Michel Roussier, who were all three secretly interested in the heroic struggle of the Vaudois, but also at the earnest entreaty of Azerole herself, Léon had set off to join the returned exiles. After sharing the hardships and perils of his people all through the autumn, he was now shut up for the winter on the Rock of the Balsille with Henri Arnaud and his brave band.

But if the gnawing pain of a secret heartache told upon the physical frame of the young Vaudoise, so that all could see its effects in the paleness of her cheek and the languor of her step; if her song for days together was hushed and her smile pathetically wan, yet the girl's unfailing brightness, her unselfish thought for others, told of a happiness underneath all that nothing really could touch. For had she not a Friend upon whom she could roll her own burden, and thus be free to help bear those of others?

It was perhaps as well for her that the work laid to

her hands that winter was far from light. Towards the end of November Madame Héloise was prostrated by an attack of low fever. Azerole, who waited upon her night and day with untiring devotion, would have felt the responsibility press still more heavily had it not been for the knowledge that upon every servant in the château, from Jacqueline and Blaise downwards, she could rely at all times for affectionate help and counsel; while little Christophe, firm in the belief that in fulfilment of Gaston's charge to him the care of both ladies rested on his small shoulders, proved himself a greater comfort than he knew.

No sooner had Madame de Rohan shown signs of convalescence than Azerole's services as sister of mercy were required at Malanot. To the amazed gladness of M. Broussel, and to the joy, though hardly to the surprise of his gentle Justine, Michel from the time of Léon Montoux's departure had become an altered man. To quote the words of his worthy uncle, who was surprised one day into using even stronger language than his wont, "the lad was changed from Michel the archfiend into Michel the archangel." Not that Roussier had all at once become the piece of perfection this eulogium seemed to imply, but the fact—and it was a great fact—remained that, instead of frequenting the wine taverns and gaming-tables, he kept closely to the farm, trying after a pathetically clumsy fashion to fill the place of son to the old people, who on their side were only too eager and willing to meet his shamefaced advances halfway. Michel was far too shy to volunteer any explanation of his altered demeanour,

and none was asked. But by Madame and M. Broussel the truth was more than suspected, and in their hearts they blessed the Vaudois lad, who had come as a gift from heaven to their house.

For months, with none to notice—for Madame Justine was engrossed with her half-invalided husband—Roussier had been overtaxing his strength in a vain attempt to undertake both his own and Léon's share of work, and M. Broussel, enfeebled by the malady from which he had been suffering for long, was not so quick as otherwise he would have been to see how the young man's efforts to accomplish the impossible were undermining his health.

Michel kept up until the winter's snows began to melt, then with a patient silence he took to his bed; and his uncle, roused to a sudden realisation of the state of affairs, reproached himself with a violent abusiveness that excited the patient's gratitude and fever at one and the same time. Madame Justine, in her distress, sent at once for Azerole. It was not possible to refuse the humble yet earnest request; but the young girl went with misgiving. She need not have feared. Michel accepted her kind offices gratefully, and neither by word or look gave her cause to regret that she had come. He made no attempt to conceal that her gentle ministrations were a pleasure to him, that the touch of her hand on his brow soothed the throbbing pain, that the sound of her voice singing by his bedside quieted the distressing fancies of his fevered brain, and was sweet as heaven's own music in his ears; but he took all without outward demonstration, realising that to her

any display of feeling would be painful. And, when convalescent, he was careful not to show how he missed the almost daily visits she had paid to Malanot when he was so ill, and the old people depressed and anxious.

He was sitting on the verandah one evening in the month of April when she came bringing a basket of flowers from the Castel Brianza gardens. "For my aunt Justine, mademoiselle?" he said, rising to place a chair for her.

"No," she said quietly, "they are for you, monsieur. I was remembering that this was your first day of returning to work, and I thought you would be tired out and might be glad to have the flowers. You were so fond of them when you were ill."

Roussier took the basket, and his thin fingers rested with a lingering touch upon the gay blossoms for a moment or two; when he spoke his voice was a little husky. "Your memory is too kind, mademoiselle, and it remembers many things. Perchance it will recall the prayer you once prayed that He—Him you call the God of the Vaudois—would make Michel Roussier believe that you, mademoiselle, and monsieur your brother were in very truth his friends?" She bowed her head silently, forgetful until afterwards to wonder how it was that he knew of that same prayer of hers. "Mademoiselle, methinks the good God has heard the prayer." Still she did not speak. Her eyes had filled with a sudden rush of tears. He held out his hand, which she took in hers. "Mademoiselle, I am not worthy of the honour, but if in your kind goodness you will continue on to the end to be to Michel Roussier the

sister-friend you have shown yourself throughout these past weeks, he will be grateful, and—and—ay, even content."

And as the girl walked slowly back to the château, Michel's strange look haunted her, while his still stranger words kept ringing in her ears like the muffled tolling of a funeral bell—"If you will continue on to the end."

CHAPTER XXI

MONDOVI THE BLACK

One evening in May two men, escorted by a considerable force of armed troopers, crossed over from Dauphiné into Piedmont by the pass Julian, and took the road leading to Lucerna. They were the Abbé Têtu and the Count de Mondovi. Both gentlemen were travelling incognito, "for a joke merely," as the count was fond of reiterating with his boisterous laugh. Count Basile de Mondovi, "Mondovi the Black," as he was generally called, who wore the rich but sober costume of a city merchant, was a tall, powerfully-built man, swarthy-complexioned, with fiery black eyes gleaming from under shaggy eyebrows, a deep scar across his face, and an expression about the mouth that suggested a temper ugly enough to make the man who owned it safer to have as a friend than as a foe.

"Merely for a joke," the count's companion was wont to echo, and he too would laugh, but the laugh had a suspicion of sounding to order. In spite of his disguise, which consisted of the Capuchin's white habit with the hood drawn well over the face, the Abbé Têtu would have betrayed his identity to the wary by that harsh, grating laugh.

It was almost dark when the travellers, pausing on the brow of a hill, looked across the intervening plain towards the grey towers of the huge pile of building which the quasi monk pointed out as the monastery of Lucerna.

"Ma foi! So these are the woods where your nightingale sings!" laughed Count Basile.

But this time the abbé did not laugh. The day had been oppressively hot, nevertheless, as befitting his disguise, he had been obliged to go on foot when traversing the more frequented districts, and the exercise had been by no means to his mind. He was footsore and weary, and in consequence his temper, naturally fragile, was worn too.

"He thinks," muttered Monsieur l'Abbé in an irritable aside to himself, "he thinks I have come here but to decoy my barbette-bird into my net, but he is wrong. That is only half my business. Madame Héloise, from what monsieur the prior tells me, must be failing fast in health. Before she dies she will bequeath to the Church the half of her estates in order to ransom monsieur her son from—what shall I say?—from death? Nay truly, but from what is worse, from excommunication by Holy Mother Church."

"He thinks," said Mondovi the Black to himself, while he struck his spurs into the sides of his horse, then hit it savagely for rearing, "he thinks I have come but to assist in the fun of catching the Vaudoise nightingale, but he is wrong. That joke would scarce have been worth the journey, had it not been that I

had a mind to see how the little hunchback looks after all these years."

The next day but one after the foregoing conversation old Blaise, a look of uneasiness on his honest face, ushered Michel Roussier into the hall at Castel Brianza where Madame de Rohan and Azerole were sitting at work. "Pardon, mesdames," said Roussier, saluting hurriedly, and speaking with considerable agitation, while he wiped the drops from his heated brow. The day had been sultry, and he had galloped from Malanot to Castel Brianza without drawing bridle. "Pardon, I pray you, my lack of ceremony, but my business, Madame, is urgent. The Abbé Têtu is here, that is at Lucerna, and I take it he has come on the devil's errand." Azerole's cheek paled, but it was at Madame Héloise she threw a quick glance of apprehension. "There is another with him, and they are both disguised. Yesternight I met the two on the highroad. Something about the pair stirred my suspicions. I looked harder, and it came to me I had seen before the evil eyes that gleamed at me from behind the monk's cowl. And, when they had passed, the wind brought back the Abbé Têtu's laugh. This afternoon they came to Malanot. Nanette told them my uncle and I were from home. But I was no further as it happened than the great barn, and from the window in the loft I watched them. They were taking a good look over the place. In time they came to the barn, and stood a moment or two talking, little guessing, I wot, that any one was within earshot. Through the cracks in the flooring I could both see and hear. I

soon gathered it was the Vaudois heretic they were in search of. The abbé's friend seemed to have a curiosity to see the brother of — of — Mademoiselle Montoux. I could not hear all, but I caught a rough joke about—" Michel hesitated, darting a quick glance of distress towards the young girl, "about 'the barbette nightingale,' as they made bold to call her, who, they declared, would soon be singing in her gilded French cage at St. Cyr."

Madame Héloise drew Azerole close to her and put a protecting arm round her waist. "Fear nothing, ma mie. None can touch you here. You must keep within doors as much as possible till they are gone. When you go out, even to the gardens, Blaise or one of the other servants must always be near. Who is the abbé's companion, think you, Michel? Another priest?"

"I think not, Madame. Certes, my discernment is greatly at fault if, despite his bourgeois garb, he be not a noble, and a fierce one to boot. I caught the half of his name; he slipped it out himself. But the abbé stopped him, muttering that walls had ears, which was nigher the truth than he knew. The name began—" Roussier frowned in the effort to recall it— "ah, yes, Mondov—was it not? Comment, Madame?" This with a start, for Madame Héloise, her face deadly white, had suddenly grasped his arm with a grip that was pain.

"Mondovi? The Count de Mondovi?" she gasped in a hoarse voice.

"Ça! ça! Madame, but I believe that was the very word I caught!"

"Describe him. Say, what is he like?"

Michel smiled grimly. "He is the picture of a man we should paint wherewith to frighten children. His complexion is darker than most men's, his eyes gleam like fire. It might be that for a demon he would be reckoned handsome, as demons go, save for the hideous scar that zigzags down one side of his face."

Madame dropped the arm she held, and repeated half under her breath the name she had uttered before. "Basile de Mondovi—Mondovi the Black!" But the next instant, looking wildly round the hall, she cried almost fiercely, "Christophe! Where is the boy?"

Michel Roussier turned away with something like impatience. What did it matter where Monsieur de Beaurégard was just then? Peste! How could she think of him at such a moment when Mademoiselle Montoux was in danger? He wondered at Azerole's gentleness, for, seemingly forgetful of herself, she went up to Madame Héloise and, taking her hand, said soothingly, "Christophe is in bed. You remember he went very early, because he wanted to get up before the dawn to-morrow morning, 'in time,' so he said, 'to see the sun open the eyes of the flowers with his golden keys.' Christophe is safe, dear Madame."

"Safe!" the word was a moan of despair. "*Safe*, and these men—*that* man here?" She threw up her hands and laughed; a laugh that chilled her hearers. "He has come then, come at last!" Then, grasping with both hands the back of the chair beside her, she stood rigid and motionless, gazing terrifiedly at the door,

as if she expected to see it flung open by the dreaded object of her thoughts.

Michel, utterly at a loss to account for a scene whose very mysteriousness was irritating, and not daring to remain a minute longer, strode out of the hall and across the court to the gate, which he found Blaise locking and barring with hands that trembled by reason of something other than the feebleness of age. "See here, good Blaise," he said in a low tone, signing to the old man to undo the bars, "I do not understand what all this means concerning that same Mondovi. But I do understand that Mademoiselle Montoux is in danger at the hands of one or both of these men. She must not set foot without the château. You must let no stranger—man, woman, or child—pass the gate of the court until I return. Within three hours expect me. Listen for the cry of the death-owl, and when that is repeated three times, followed by three sharp raps on the gate, open to me."

Another minute and Roussier, mounting his horse that stood waiting in the court, galloped off. But not to Malanot. In response to an invitation left with Nanette by the Capuchin monk Michel was going to sup that evening with Prior Baronius and his guests at the monastery of Lucerna.

Roussier was welcomed cordially by the kind old prior. Also with a great show of friendliness the Abbé Têtu, who had thrown off his disguise, introduced "our gallant friend Roussier" to his travelling companion, "M. Scaliger of Paris," the swarthy-faced gentleman Michel had seen through the floor of

the loft that afternoon. The remaining guest of the party was a French officer whom Roussier recognised as monsieur the commandant of the garrison at Pinerolo.

During supper the talk, led by the abbé and the prior, turned upon the religious piety of Madame de Maintenon, her wonderful influence for good over the king her husband, and the saintliness of her labour not only at the court and among the demoiselles of St. Cyr, but among the Huguenots, scores of whom, so declared the abbé, were converted through her means.

The prior's face shone. "It is a glorious work," he said; "one for which she will be richly rewarded. Truly of her it might be said in the words of one of the holy Fathers, that she doth 'compass sea and land to make one proselyte'"; a quotation which exhibited at one and the same time the good prior's ignorance and knowledge of a book which, if the truth were known, was read by him oftener than the authorities of his Church would have considered befitting a priest, whose first duty was the study of the Fathers. But from Alphonse Têtu's cold-blooded narration of the merciless measures against the Huguenots to which Madame de Maintenon in the blindness of her zeal gave her powerful approval, the kind-hearted prior shrank with evident pain. "I know, I know," he murmured, his face full of troubled perplexity, "I know the Church can do no wrong. I know, too, that the holy Jerome says, 'It is not cruelty but piety to punish crimes for God,' yet me-

thinks the pain endured by the pitying spirit of the punisher must needs equal, nay, even exceed, that of the punished! It oft troubles me to understand why our Blessed Lord, Himself so pitiful, laid down for us in this matter no clear command. The very knowledge that the torture, the killing, and the burning were His blessed will would, I doubt not, nerve the weakest of us for the task. 'Tis strange His silence! Passing strange!" and the old man sighed heavily.

"Come, father, our talk has wearied thee. We will leave thee to take thy rest while we go and greet our good brother Thomas," said the abbé, and, rising, he respectfully saluted the prior and left the apartment, followed, at a sign from him, by the others.

Brother Thomas they found waiting for them in his cell, and, with no further loss of time, the abbé, when all were seated, began in a brisk tone, "Now to business, messieurs. Mon ami"—this in his warmest tone to Roussier—"we are going to renew our old proposal. Now, as before, we are in want of your valuable aid in obtaining possession of the Vaudoise, Azerole Montoux. We have at our command the necessary means if force be needed, but in such a delicate matter it were better—nay, we prefer it—to rely solely on your help, monsieur."

Michel laughed boisterously. "Ma foi! But I have had enough of midnight orgies with the ghostly spectres of the Bois Suaire! I think I hear them yet with their blood-curdling shriekings. I do not say it as a boast, Monsieur l'Abbé, but I warrant

there is none that would have gone further than I did in that inferno of a forest and have returned alive and sane. No, no, I have had enough of such revels. Besides"—here he laughed again—"the man I hated is out of the way. It was hatred"—Michel ground his teeth—"ay, it was hatred of Gaston de Rohan that urged me on. He no longer stands in my path. He is dead, happily. I shall get mademoiselle for my wife without your help, Monsieur l'Abbé."

"Not so fast, mon ami, not so fast," softly interposed the ecclesiastic with a smile. "I just happen to have heard that monsieur my cousin de Rohan is not dead, but in truth at this moment very much alive."

Almost rudely Michel interrupted, and this time his laugh was one of pure scorn. "I shall believe that when I see him. He has been dead for months. Madame his mother, and for that matter all the world besides, knows it."

Alphonse Têtu turned to the commandant. "I think we may with safety confide the secret to our incredulous young friend. *He* is not likely"—it was the abbé's turn to laugh—"to aid Monsieur de Rohan to make his escape."

"Captain Gaston de Rohan is at this moment a prisoner under my care in the citadel of Pinerolo," grimly responded the commandant.

Roussier's start and change of colour was wholly unfeigned, but it admirably fitted in with the part he was playing. "Monsieur de Rohan alive and in the citadel of Pinerolo—actually within easy reach of my revenge?

By—" Roussier's fist came down with a crash upon the table, his face was red, and his eye gleamed like that of a wild beast about to spring upon its prey.

Still smiling, the abbé laid his hand soothingly on the young man's arm. "Gently, gently, my good fellow. There is still time for revenge. We hear that my cousin is soon to be liberated. But, if we be quick we shall have our pretty bird in her cage before he has escaped from his."

Roussier, wiping the drops from his brow, looked from one to the other of the faces that were watching him with various degrees of curiosity. "Though all the fiends in Christendom were in the Bois Suaire," he burst forth with savage unconcern as to the fitness of his phrases, "I will track her out!"

Monsieur Scaliger looked across the table at his friend the abbé with a leer that brought into hideous conspicuousness the scar on his face. "Alphonse," he murmured, in what he believed was an undertone —"Alphonse, you have got your man."

The abbé shook his head warningly. Michel affected to be too absorbed to have heard. "Eh bien, what is your plan, my good Roussier?"

Michel sat down, and with his elbows on the table and his head on his hands appeared to be considering the question. In reality he was rehearsing to himself the project he had thought out that evening on his way to Lucerna.

"Of course," went on the ecclesiastical diplomatist, who had no idea of allowing his tool to consider himself indispensable, "of course we can obtain the girl

by other means. Monsieur Scaliger and Madame de Rohan are old friends. Without doubt through monsieur's persuasions Madame will be easily induced to give up the barbette, or, if need be, *forced* to do so." And Roussier, listening with all his ears, recalled with not a little uneasiness the agitation of the mistress of Castel Brianza on hearing that the Count de Mondovi was in the neighbourhood.

"The fact is, messieurs"—this time the hard voice was that of Brother Thomas—"we mean to have this dangerous young Vaudoise. Firstly, of course, for the sake of her soul's salvation, and secondly, for the sake of Monsieur Roussier's happiness. And we shall gain our point, for at our back we have the power both of Church and State. The absence of Monsieur de Rohan from Brianza and of the barbette's brother from Malanot, the fact that at this moment France and Savoy have joined hands to crush this impudent handful of Vaudois rebels on the Balsille, make the present opportunity a highly favourable one for our enterprise. And, even if it be necessary to storm Castel Brianza, eh bien, we have the dragoons at hand. Duke Amadeus, for the sake of his friend, his most Catholic Majesty at Versailles, will provide us with a warrant."

Michel rose and began to stride up and down the floor. "This is Monday—tiens! the day after to-morrow, that would afford me time," he said with slow calculation. "Mademoiselle Montoux will not suffer surprise on receiving an anonymous message to repair to the Bois Suaire at dawn on Wednesday morning, for, as Brother Thomas has just said, the Vaudois runaways

are making fools of themselves at this moment on the Rock of the Balsille, and mademoiselle is on the *qui vive* for secret news. But I promise you it will not be a friendly barbet that will meet her at the rendezvous in the Haunted Forest!" The speaker stopped and drew a deep breath.

Alphonse Têtu rubbed his hands softly together. "I see you are going to have your revenge upon your rival, mon ami. And," he added significantly, "there will be the more substantial reward——"

He was interrupted by Roussier, whose face had grown black as a thundercloud at the mention of his rival. "I am not so sure of that," he shouted in a sudden access of fury. "He may slip through my fingers yet. Peste! it is ever my confounded luck to get fooled in that way. See you, Monsieur l'Abbé, I care not a straw for all the gold crowns in the world in comparison to having the chance of flinging scorn at that insolent braggart who was wont to find his amusement in treating me like a dog. My reward I swear must needs be of another kind than money; nothing short of witnessing the humiliation of my enemy will satisfy me." Michel, a look of evil anticipation on his face, turned to the officer of the garrison. "Monsieur Commandant, I ask from you a five minutes' interview with the prisoner, Monsieur de Rohan. The time will amply serve my purpose. I warrant it will prove too long for him, ha! ha!"

The officer waved his hand haughtily. "You ask the impossible, my fine fellow."

With a dogged air Michel folded his arms. "Then,

gentlemen, all I have to say is that you ask of *me* the impossible. That which you require of Michel Roussier is no child's play. A pretty strong stimulant I vow is needed to keep up one's spirits in the Bois Suaire. Gratified revenge is about the best I know. At any rate it is the only one that is like to suit my constitution. But certes, please yourselves, messieurs. I think you mentioned that you had some other strings to your bow," and Michel, rising to go, took a step towards the door.

But the abbé called him back, and, half playfully, half scornfully, rallied him upon carrying his jealous animosity to the length of absurdity.

"Absurdity!" echoed Michel in a fury. "Absurdity? And you all hate him like the very poison yourselves, only you do not choose to say that same! *That* if you will is the absurdity of the thing!" and in high dudgeon he took another step nearer the door.

A hurried word was exchanged between the French officer and the Abbé Têtu. "See here, Monsieur Roussier," called the commandant, a touch of contempt in his voice, for, strange to say, this young farmer's vindictive hatred of the prisoner in the velvet mask met with no answering echo in his jailor's breast—"see here. I agree to your amiable request upon two conditions. The first is that you give me your word of honour that you will attempt no manner of hurt to my prisoner."

It was Michel's turn to stand upon his dignity. Drawing himself up to his full height he made answer, "Michel Roussier is not the man to strike a foe when his hands are tied. I shall merely return to Monsieur

de Rohan the same that he once gave me. Upon himself I shall not lay a finger."

"No, nor even your tongue too heavily," retorted the other. To this Michel made no response. "My other stipulation is this," the commandant went on stiffly, "that you swear that you will not reveal to any one the fact of your visit, or the real name of Monsieur de Rohan, who is known in the citadel by another name. I understand that you are a man of your word."

"I swear," shortly replied Roussier. "And see you, Monsieur Commandant, to-morrow it must be." The officer curtly signified his assent. "And the hour, if you please, monsieur?"

"After dark, fellow, I shall be in readiness."

Roussier considered a moment. "Bene, two hours before midnight I shall be at the citadel. And then—!" with a sudden recollection of the part he was playing Michel stopped, smiled sardonically, and fiercely rubbed his palms together, apparently in anticipation of the moment when he should have his rival, figuratively speaking, in his own hands to crush at will. With an eagerness to be off, that he might at once set affairs in train, he had seized his hat once more, when the remembrance of final arrangements checked him. "Monsieur l'Abbé, without doubt you understand that I must have assistance. The last time I tracked the demoiselle to her tryst she—ma foi! it makes my flesh creep now to think of it!—she disappeared before my very eyes as if the fiends themselves had spirited her away!" and Roussier wiped genuine drops of moisture from his brow. "I will have nought to do with your troopers,

messieurs. In the Bois Suaire they would become but a flying flock of white feathers. It will be necessary for you"—he waved his arm toward the trio sitting somewhat apart from the commandant—"to accompany me. Without doubt we shall have a fainting maiden to carry between us some two or three miles right across to the further side of the forest. It will take the four of us to accomplish that before the morning is too far advanced."

Monsieur Scaliger chuckled. "So I am to have a share after all in the barbette-hunt! Good!"

Alphonse Têtu moved uneasily. "It is undesirable; nay, I tell you, fellow, it will not at all suit my further purposes that it should come to the knowledge of my cousin, the lady of Brianza, that I had a hand in this little affair," he asserted haughtily, secretly enraged with the impudent effrontery of this country rustic.

"There is naught to fear on that score, Monsieur l'Abbé," coolly returned Roussier. "It must needs be in the dark that we set forth on this little affair. Moreover, monsieur, you have your disguise."

"It is the truth the fellow speaks," put in Monsieur Scaliger, laughing again at the sight of the quailing figure of Brother Thomas. "Courage, good brother! The abbé will exorcise the evil spirits of the Haunted Forest for us. Allons! allons! but this spirited—ha! ha!—game of hunt grows into one altogether to my liking."

A moment more and the door had closed upon Michel Roussier's retreating figure. M. Scaliger rallied his friend upon his grave looks. "Comment, Alphonse,

but surely we have succeeded beyond our wildest expectations in hoodwinking that intemperate fool, the husband-to-be—ha! ha!—of the caged nightingale!"

The abbé stroked his chin meditatively. "'Hoodwinked'? I devoutly hope so. 'Intemperate'? Certes, the fellow is intemperate to madness. 'A fool'?—" Alphonse Têtu paused a moment, a shadow of disquietude clouding his brow. "Query—*is* Michel Roussier a fool?"

CHAPTER XXII

A BROKEN VOW

"Wife," Blaise lowered his voice to a whisper, "Madame, our beautiful one, she has that look on her face, the look I have seen but once; it was in the fortress in the château of the Count de Mondovi ten years agone. Wife, Mondovi the Black is here."

Jacqueline was never the woman to scream, or she must have screamed now. Instead, she sat quite still for a moment or two like one stunned; then, catching hold of her husband's arm, said, "Help me down the stairs to her."

As fast as her rheumatic limbs would carry her Jacqueline hurried to the hall, where she found mademoiselle trying, but without much success, to restore Madame Héloise from the faintness which had seized her after Roussier's departure. Azerole had longed to summon the servants to her aid, but instinctively felt that none but Blaise and Jacqueline should see their mistress now. When Madame came to herself at last it was with the old cry of distress, "Christophe! Christophe!" and she motioned the others aside when they tried to make her rest on the couch where they had laid her. "Do not keep me. Do you hear me, Jacqueline? I must go to him."

"And so you shall, Madame," rejoined the old servant, speaking soothingly, and signing to Azerole not to oppose her mistress. "But drink this first, I pray you," and Jacqueline held to Madame's lips the glass Azerole brought. To please them Madame Héloise drank the cordial; then, pushing the damp hair from off her forehead, she rose to her feet, and with quick but unsteady steps moved to the door. Azerole sprang to her side and drew her arm within her own.

In the little room opening off from Azerole's to which Christophe had lately been promoted the boy lay fast asleep, his delicate face flushed rosy-red, a smile on his half-parted lips. Madame stood motionless, her hands tightly clasped. But she did not kiss the sleeper. She only stood and gazed—gazed until Azerole's heart ached to see her, while down Jacqueline's cheeks the tears trickled slowly.

"Dear Madame, now that you see Christophe is asleep and safe, you will come to bed," pleaded the girl.

But the words roused Madame de Rohan. Almost pushing Azerole from her, she cried hoarsely, "To bed, girl? You do not know what you say. Christophe must be saved, I tell you. We must hide him. That man," she shuddered, "he has come for him. Holy Mother of God, help us!" The cry ended in a moan of despair, for never in all the experience of her sorrowful life had this woman received help in answer to her many and passionate appeals to Mary of Nazareth.

Azerole, though feeling desperate, forced herself to speak calmly. "Madame, you will wake the boy. Come into my room and rest. We can do nothing until

Monsieur Roussier returns. He told us to wait. Blaise and Jacqueline will keep watch downstairs, and tell us when he arrives."

Apparently powerless to resist, Madame allowed herself to be led into the next room and laid back in the cushioned chair by the window. She closed her eyes, and Jacqueline, nodding approval of mademoiselle's success, hobbled away to join Blaise in his vigil in the hall.

For some time Madame lay quite still, but she was not asleep, her brows were contracted, and ever and again her lips twitched. The next quarter of an hour was a hard one for Azerole. In her anxiety for Madame she had until now failed to take in the full force of Michel's warning of danger to herself. With a vague terror she recalled his words, "Soon we shall hear our Vaudoise nightingale singing in her French cage." She brooded over the mysterious prediction until her nerves threatened to get beyond her control. A slight noise outside—it was only the low growl of the watch-dog—so startled her that she could not altogether stifle the cry that rose to her lips. It roused Madame Héloise. Starting up, she grasped the girl's arm. "It is nothing, Madame, only Marphise barking. I am sorry to have disturbed you, but—" her lips quivered, "I—I think I got frightened."

Madame de Rohan glanced at the girl's pale face. "Poor child," she murmured, smoothing the brown hair with a caressing touch. "Fear nothing, ma mie. It was foolish of Roussier to frighten you. He thinks the danger yours, but he is wrong. It is—it is—" her voice

was growing agitated again, "it is Christophe for whom there is danger. He must not stay here," she went on hurriedly. "You must take him away somewhere and hide him. You will save him, Azerole! you will save my—my—ward?"

"Nay, Madame"—there was a touch of something like sternness in the girl's voice, albeit she had lowered it to a whisper—"it is not your ward you mean, but Christophe de Rohan, your son."

With a low cry Madame dropped the hand she had seized and covered her face. "Mother of God! you know this? Does every one know?"

But now Azerole's arms encircled the terrified woman. "No one knows," she murmured, "no one save myself. I have suspected it almost ever since I came to Castel Brianza, but I *knew* it from the time of Christophe's accident. Ah, Madame, did not you love me enough to trust in me?"

"I did, I did. And I longed to tell you all, but I knew your strict uprightness, your hatred of falsehood, and I dared not. I dreaded losing your love, child. It has grown precious to me. And ah! there are so few to love me now!"

The dreariness of her tone, the droop of the proud head, were too much for Azerole. Tightening her arms round the lonely woman she exclaimed passionately, "Madame, *dear* Madame, there is naught you have to tell me that could stop my loving you. Tell me all. It will be easier when you have unburdened to some one, even to me. Tell me the story of your life."

"My life!" echoed the other in a tone of indescrib-

able pathos. "My life began with my happy childhood in Castel Brianza, and ended with Christophe's birth in Dauphiné. The years since then have been a living death. And now," she sprang to her feet in sudden remembrance, "that man, the Count de Mondovi, will be coming for the boy. He thinks my Christophe is his son. I told him so. Yes, I told him so," she reiterated fiercely, meeting Azerole's startled look. "And there is worse besides. Why would you hear it, girl? Only that you too should turn from me who am a woman accursed?"

With gentle force Azerole drew her back to the easy-chair. "You must rest now. You will need your strength for afterwards. Michel Roussier will not return for some time yet. And, while we wait, I know you will permit me to share with you that secret whose crushing weight you have borne alone too long. I say again, dear mother-friend, that naught—naught you have to reveal can quench my love." The other's look softened, but she shook her head. "Madame, tell me the story of your troubles, it will help me to forget my own."

The bait took. For the second time Madame Héloise threw her arm protectingly round the girl kneeling at her feet, the next moment she had drawn back, mindful only of the record of a dark past which this young Vaudoise with her strange power of persuasiveness was urging her to lay bare. "My life, did you say? Ah me! for these many years so bright! like one long day of summer sunshine. The world and all it held for me so beautiful! Heaven itself I thought could not be

more sweet. Then suddenly the sky o'ercast, the clouds gathered, darker and ever darker, until with sullen blackness there burst over my head the storm that wrecked my life. The first sorrow was the loss of my father, next came the death, one after the other, of my two precious little girls. By that time Gaston too was gone from me to the military school in Paris. In my loneliness I thought the pain of my bereavements was unbearable. Later I found there could be worse.

"The freshness of my grief was past when my Bayard came home to me on a brief furlough. And now I thought the sun would shine again, for ever in my Bayard's presence there was joy. But this time there fell a shadow. It came with the knowledge that secretly my husband was being influenced by the Huguenots. He would not keep it from me. He even tried to make me listen while he read to me from the forbidden book, that same Bible which you now have, Azerole. But my mind was full of fears, I could not listen. Then came the evening when he left me, to return in time for supper, he said. I did not ask him whither he went—I dared not—but all the while I knew. At the hall door he came back to me, and for the second time folded me in his arms. 'Sweetest wife,' he whispered, my head on his shoulder, 'may God our Father and Jesus Christ our Saviour keep thee now and ever, my precious one.' Half terrified, I knew not why, I clung to him weeping. 'Nay then, sweetheart,' he murmured, 'I did not mean to startle thee. Only some impulse of love I could not restrain at sight of thee brought me again to thy side.' Then with that

wondrous smile of his, more of heaven than earth it ever was, he left me, my Bayard—to return—nevermore."

The mournful voice ceased. Azerole, with her own heart beating quickly, waited. "At midnight Alphonse Têtu came, his face black with wrath. There had been a secret gathering of the Huguenots at which my husband had been present. The soldiery had surprised the meeting, there had been violence on both sides, and Major de Rohan, for defending the worshippers from the brutality of the dragoons, had been arrested on the double charge of rebellion against the king and of heresy. I fell on my knees before the abbé and implored him to save Bayard. 'I will give you anything —to the half of my patrimony, only save my husband!' I entreated. He stood relentless. 'For the honour of the house of de Rohan!' I pled. This touched him. 'Madam,' he said sternly, 'money can do but little where heresy has stained the fair name of a noble house, but—' 'Anything, anything!' I moaned, for I was distraught, 'only not his life!' The abbé's reply came slowly. 'Another life instead of his consecrated to God and the Church might atone. If Heaven gives you another son, madam—' I interrupted him. 'I will give him gladly to God and the Church, only save my husband!' He smiled, and went swiftly away. Not till long after did I understand that smile. The half of my estates in Piedmont he thought to have in any case, and, in the event of my having a second son, the whole of the boy's patrimony would revert to the Church.

"The following day Alphonse returned, bringing me the news that Bayard had been set at liberty. Afterwards I learnt that his release had been obtained entirely through the influence of Monsieur the Baron de Montélimart, your grand-uncle, child, who was then in favour with the Court party. It had been necessary to hurry my husband off at once to rejoin the army, in order, so Alphonse assured me, that the few who knew of the scandal of the night before might be the more easily silenced. Relieved, yet dismayed on hearing he was gone, I listened stunned, hearing or at least heeding naught, though the abbé talked sternly on. His parting words roused me, however—'Your vow to God and the Church, Héloise de Rohan, you will remember. Take heed, for, if that solemn oath be broken, heaven's curse will fall on you and yours.'

"Months passed without news of any kind. At Les Rochers de Rohan I waited alone, for Gaston, young though he was, had been called to the field. At last one morning, when the sun shone and the birds sang in the golden-leaved trees, and the autumn winds had hushed their sighing, and all things in the still fair world of nature spoke of gladness, a courier brought the word, 'Monsieur the Major de Rohan had fallen at the siege of Mons.'"

Azerole drew closer to Madame; but, while the girl's tears rained down her face, Héloise de Rohan's eyes were dry. "What followed I scarce know. The next I remember is journeying, with only Blaise and Jacqueline in attendance, to the lonely fortress of the Count de Mondovi in the forests of the northern Dauphiné.

In that quiet solitude, sheltered from all save the Countess Adèle's tender sympathy, I lived through those first weeks in a kind of stupor. Adèle's need roused me at last. The count was absent from home; she, always fragile, was now in delicate health, and having to care for her took me out of myself. Unexpectedly one snowy winter's night her babe was born, and not many hours later both mother and child lay dead. The shock was too much for me, and the next day Christophe, sickly and misformed, so they told me, opened his eyes upon a sorrowful world. The servants went hither and thither, but could gain no tidings of their master. He was a wild man, Mondovi the Black, savage-tempered to all save his gentle wife, for after his rough fashion he loved her.

"Kind Susanne Bersour, trooper Jean's wife, had been brought the day before in haste from the village, and pityingly she now gave to me the care no longer needed by the gentle mistress of the château. It was easy to read in her face that she thought I too would die. But fiercely I fought for life, life to care for my boy, and even from Susanne I guarded him with a jealousy she dared not withstand. On the second day, with returning strength, a wild resolve came to me. I confided it to Susanne. I had no other I could trust save my faithful Jacqueline. Susanne had a mother's heart, and she, poor simple soul, proved true to me. She whispered in my ear that she would help me, and my secret she would tell to none but to Jean her husband, and he would keep it too. So it was given out to the old servants in the château that the dead baby was the

stranger lady's, and the poor, deformed, tiny atom of humanity still alive was the little Count de Mondovi. The rest was easy. All went as I had foreseen. I waited in the château for a month, and then the Count returned. In the bitterness of his grief he resented, as I knew he would, the existence of the miserable infant for whom his Adèle had given her life. 'A hunchback puling to be Count de Mondovi? Never!' he muttered, and swore a terrible oath. Then I told him that in the stead of my own that was dead, and for the sake of my loved friend, I would take the child. It could not live many months. And, even if it survived, none need know that the hunchback had been born heir to the house of Mondovi. He should be called by his mother's maiden name of de Beaurégard, and would pass for the ward of a widow with strange fancies in her loneliness. Eagerly he caught at the suggestion. 'On one condition, monsieur count,' said I, 'will I adopt your son. You must swear that you will tell the truth to no one. You must swear never to come or send to ask after the boy, not at the least ere ten years have gone. He must be mine, my own while he lives.'

"Count Basile bowed. 'Good, madam. Have it as you will. Your proposal, if somewhat eccentric, is generous, and the terms you dictate are altogether to my liking, madam.' He bowed again, took a step towards the door, stopped, hesitated, and the look of relief on his swarthy face changed to something like disgust when he glanced at the child in my arms. 'Mayhap I had best kiss the brat and be done with it,' he muttered to himself.

"'No, no,' I cried, involuntarily clasping the infant closer.

"'But I will,' he shouted angrily, and roughly pulled away the shawl. 'He is my son.' But the boy, thus rudely awakened, screamed with terror, his little face contorted as if he would fall into a fit. Half relieved, half enraged, the count turned on his heel with another oath. 'So be it, then. The hunchback has chosen,' he muttered. 'Adieu, Madame, I am indebted to you,' and he bowed low. 'If he should grow big and strong you can let me know.' And with that he laughed, and strode from the room.

"There is little more to tell," continued Madame de Rohan, letting her head fall wearily upon her hand. "I dared not keep my baby with me at Les Rochers de Rohan. It was too near Alphonse Têtu's suspicious eyes. Susanne took my baby to the mountains. Then followed four long years. My stolen times with my little Christophe, and Gaston's brief furloughs, were the only gleams of light in the darkness of my life, for I was wretched. I told myself that it was separation from my baby that was killing me, and at last, on the death of my faithful Susanne, I bethought me of returning to Castel Brianza, the happy home of my girlhood. There, alone with my child, beyond the reach of Alphonse Têtu's reach, I should be at peace. At peace!" she laughed a mirthless laugh. "Vain hope! It was not long ere the abbé found where I had gone, and followed to inquire after his dear cousin's welfare. Money, I soon discovered, was what he wanted; and he got it in plenty for the asking, for I dared not thwart him. In the triumph of his cruel eyes I fancied I

could read his knowledge of my guilty secret. In time, however, it dawned upon me that it was not so, nevertheless the terror of his presence at times tortured me well-nigh to madness. Ay, and even when he was far distant the haunting wretchedness remained. I tried to persuade myself that it was my little Christophe's fragile health that oppressed my spirits. But in my heart I knew better. It was—that broken vow! It had brought the curse of heaven and of the Church on me and mine. There were moments when, almost maddened, I believed I should be driven to tell all, and fulfil my vow, and give up my Christophe. I tried to strengthen myself in my resolve by estranging myself from him, and at times I thought I should succeed. My heart seemed to grow hard as a stone, and I was glad. I should feel nothing by-and-by, I told myself, pain would cease to hurt. But it was of no use. There was my son Gaston. How could I ever grow hard to him—his father's boy? Then you came, child, and in spite of me my heart grew soft again. At last I made up my mind I would let things rest, at least until my Gaston came home. Until then surely the Church would not condemn me to a childless widowhood. But the hand of heaven is against me. The curse has fallen. Gaston has been taken from me. I shall never see him again. And now the Count de Mondovi has come for his son. I shall have to own the truth. The Church will demand the fulfilment of my vow, but it will be too late. The blessing of heaven will be withheld. Oh, Holy Mother of God, why did I not die, and my baby too, ten years ago?"

For a moment or two Azerole sat stunned. Then, with a little cry, she rose and threw her arms about the bowed figure in the chair. "Oh, Madame! dear Madame! What you have suffered. And never to know all these long years that the dear Lord Jesus was longing to gather you up in His loving arms and comfort you! He is near you now; ah, will not you listen while He speaks?"

"Listen?" echoed the other with a shudder. "Listen, while He pronounced His curse?"

"No, no, His blessing, not His curse," cried Azerole, then broke off in distress, realising her own helplessness. What could she, a feeble, inexperienced girl, say to help this burdened soul? Her heart sank, but only for a moment. The next, she had remembered that if the all-wise God condescended to use her He would give the needed wisdom. There was no time for more than a breath of prayer, but it was enough. "In the Holy Scriptures, Madame, the Scriptures which your own Church professes to obey, it is written—'When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it, for the Lord thy God shall surely require it of thee.'" The hand Azerole held in hers trembled as the girl repeated solemnly the words of the divine law. "Nay, Madame, but in very truth there is naught to fear, for your vow, the vow of Héloise de Rohan, will be paid, paid even to the full."

Bewildered, startled, the elder woman shrank back in her chair. Clasping still more tenderly the hand she held, Azerole went on, and her words, spoken with slow distinctness, came with a power there was no re-

sisting. "Dear Madame, when you vowed to give your child to God and to the Church, He heard the promise. Looking down with a great compassion for His suffering child, He saw that she did not know the tender love that filled His heart, and that now knowing, not understanding, she was afraid. But He knew the time would come when she would know her Father God, and His Son her Saviour. He Himself would teach her. And He waited, grieved, yet pitiful. But even while He waited, He Himself was gently bringing about the fulfilment of the vow. Madame, you vowed to give your child to God and to the Church, the true Church, the Head of which is Christ Jesus, and the members His faithful believers. Once more our Father God looked down with eyes of yearning love, but yours were full of tears, you could not see Him, so He turned and smiled on little Christophe, and the child, smiling back, willingly and gladly gave his little self to God his father and to Jesus Christ his elder brother. And there and then the name of Christophe de Rohan was enrolled in heaven a member of God's true Church. You cannot snatch him back now, even if you would, Madame."

There was no reply. Like one fascinated Madame had listened. "Go on!" her burning eyes seemed to entreat.

And the young Vaudoise went on, no longer speaking her own words, but precious words of comfort from the Holy Scriptures, words, many of them familiar to Madame Héloise, whose habit for long it had been to listen, half guiltily, half hungrily, while her little son's

governess taught him the faith in which his father had died long years ago. Then, after a short pause, the girl bowed her head upon Madame de Rohan's knee and prayed, simply, trustingly, in the language of a child long used to carry her every burden to the great Burden-bearer.

Again there was a silence. Héloise de Rohan's head was also bowed. She raised it at last. Into her worn face there had come a wondrous light. "My God! my God!" she cried, her voice trembling with a glad amazement. "Can this peace — this peace that fills and calms my soul—this peace that passeth all belief—be mine in very deed?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SCREECH OF THE DEATH-OWL

"HARK! What is that?"

It was the screech of the death-owl thrice repeated, and almost immediately followed by the cautious unbarring of the court gate.

"Call Madame, wife," murmured Blaise. But, before Jacqueline could start on her errand, the ladies were in the hall.

The four, trying to read Roussier's face by the light of Blaise's lantern, were not kept long in suspense. "I bring you bad news and good, mesdames," he began, going straight to the point, for time, he knew, was precious. "The danger to mademoiselle is even greater than I feared. The Abbé Têtu has come to take her by fair means or foul back with him to France. He and his friend have brought with them an armed band, and they have applied for a warrant from Duke Amadeus to have the Vaudoise delivered up to his most Christian Majesty, Louis of France." A little cry escaped Madame Héloise, but Azerole, who had formed a plan of her own, and felt sure Roussier had the same to propose, waited expectantly. "Mademoiselle and I know of a hiding-place where she will be safe until all danger is past." "Where?" Madame de Rohan's

anxious look seemed to ask. "It were better, Madame, that you should not know. If monsieur the abbé's friend should remember to pay you the friendly visit he speaks of, and happened to inquire after Mademoiselle Montoux on behalf of the abbé, it would be safer that you should be able to assure him that you know naught."

But Madame was no longer listening. Her face, seen in the dim light of the lantern, looked grey. Unable to speak, she had suddenly grasped Azerole's arm.

"Yes, dear Madame," the girl replied soothingly. "Christophe shall go with me. I will take care of him."

"Christophe? Monsieur de Beaurégard!" echoed Roussier, staring amazed.

"Monsieur Christophe is in danger also. He, too, must be saved from these men," was the young girl's quiet response.

Michel was much perturbed. "But, mademoiselle, indeed it cannot be. To take the child with you is but to increase your danger a hundredfold. You——"

Taking a step nearer to him, she lifted her calm face to his. "Michel, I am not afraid. The God of the Vaudoise will be with me. He has never failed me yet. He will not fail me now. Michel, I tell you that, if Christophe does not go to—" she whispered close to his ear, "to the Bois Suaire, thither *I* go not."

There was no mistaking the determination of her tone. Michel turned from her to Madame de Rohan, and then it was that, reminded by the look on her face, he bethought him of the other piece of news he had to

tell. "Madame, pray be seated. I have other and better tidings for you, and sometimes I think the good is as hard to bear as the evil."

"Gaston!" gasped Madame, sinking down in the chair Blaise helped Michel to drag forward.

"Monsieur de Rohan is safe and well in the French citadel of—Peste! I was nigh forgetting I had sworn silence there; eh bien, it is not so many miles from here that you need be at a loss," concluded Michel, with the proud smile of a man who congratulates himself upon his ability to keep his word, if not in the spirit at least in the letter.

Poor Roussier! The momentary vision he had of the face of the woman he loved was almost more than he knew how to bear. Anticipating the eager questions that rose to the lips of his hearers, he assured Madame he knew absolutely nothing but the bare fact he had told her, then, muttering something about needing quiet to think out his plans, he strode from the hall into the dark corridor outside, and there paced up and down, fighting the demon within him, so he grimly put it to himself. That sweet face paling and flushing alternately, the glad light shining through her glistening tears, the quivering of the lips that would not be controlled—ah! how well he read in it all the story of her love for the man he had once hated with the fierce hatred of a consuming jealousy! And did he hate him still? Michel stood motionless, while the storm of doubt and fear swept over him. But no, and again no. Who was he that he should hate any man—he to whom so much had been forgiven? And who

was it that had come to his sick bed and told him of that forgiveness?—who but the woman who loved and was loved by that same Gaston de Rohan?

Another minute and Michel returned to the hall. If he had braced himself to face a display of feminine emotion, he might have spared himself his fears. Héloise de Rohan and Azerole Montoux had nothing of that womanly weakness which is born of selfishness. They were both ready for him when he came, and they listened quietly while he spoke in short rapid sentences. "Before dawn, mademoiselle, we must needs have reached a place of hiding. Some one go and fetch the boy. And mademoiselle," here he turned to Jacqueline, "she will want a few things with her beside food, Madame Jacqueline."

"But Christophe, he cannot walk," began his mother in a perturbed voice. "Doubtless a little way he could go, and slowly; but if it be——"

"I will carry him on my back, Madame. Tiens! better still, there is his chair-donkey. Asino is light of foot as a girl."

With this the little group separated noiselessly, Blaise and Michel to get the donkey, Azerole, assisted by Jacqueline, to gather together what might be needed for an indefinite sojourn in the Haunted Cave, Madame to wake and dress Christophe.

It had been a whim of the child's to be called early in the morning, in time, as he said, to see the flowers and birds open their eyes; but he had not counted on having to open his own in the semi-darkness of a lamp-lit room, with Madame Héloise in attendance in-

stead of Jacqueline. And when Azerole, remembering the damp chilliness of the cave, slipped softly into the room to tell Madame to dress him in his warmest velvet suit and fur-lined winter cloak, his mystification increased. Something in Madame's look and tone awed him into silence; but only at the last, and guardedly, she told him how that wicked men wanted to steal away from them their dear Azerole, but that kind Monsieur Roussier knew of a hiding-place, and Christophe must go to take care of her.

The boy looked greatly troubled. "And leave you all alone, dear Madame Héloise?" he asked incredulously, a sob rising in his throat.

Gently hushing him, Madame de Rohan gathered him up in her arms. "My little Christophe, my precious one! You must go too, for do you know, these cruel men want to take you away also! And, if they did, ah! how lonely and sad I should be then! But you will go and hide with Azerole; and, as soon as the bad men have gone away, you will return again to me. You are not frightened, chéri?"

"No, Madame, it is not that," he promptly answered, struggling to stop crying. "I am growing a big man now. I am not afraid. Besides, Azerole says the good God always takes care of us when we ask Him, like Daniel in the den of lions. But I—I—I promised Gaston that I would take care of you."

Then with a glad ring in her voice she told him the good news of Gaston. It was all that was needed to drive away his tears. "And if monsieur the captain rides home before I come back, you will tell him

how it was that I broke my promise, will you not, Madame?"

But she made no answer to that. She was holding him closer and still closer in her arms. "Christophe, my own little boy, could you call me 'mother' do you think?"

Wonderingly he met her yearning look. "Could you grow into my real mother? Ah, how I wish that you were!"

"I am! I am!" she breathed, and covered his face with kisses.

It is doubtful whether he thought she was in earnest; but his blue eyes grew wistful, and at last, flinging his arms about her neck, he held her tight without a word.

He made no further difficulty about going, and seemed only eager to show that, when danger threatened, he would not fail to act the part of little-man-Christophe. The ride through the dark forest did not frighten him; but, when Azerole and Michel got him safely down the perilous cliffs and along the bed of the torrent to the cave, a fit of childish terror seized him. Roussier had gone back to the forest to fetch the panniers, and Azerole, pretending not to see how the child shrank from the gruesome place, put her arm round him, and cheerily did the honours of what she called their "house," showing him how it was already furnished with a table and seats, and how they could make it delightfully comfortable with all the nice things they had brought from the château. "Only think, Christophe, I have remembered to bring 'La

Fontaine!' And wait but until the sun gets up, and comes to call upon us in our house, then you will see what a truly nice place it is." But, seeing that he still clung tremblingly to her, turning his head away from the impenetrable darkness of the recesses at the back of the cave, she led him a little way in, and showed him by the light of the lantern Léon's "treasure-cupboard," the sloping ledge under which was kept the precious Bible. It was with a strange thrill she reverently placed in the child's little hands the very book which long years ago his own father had loved and studied. The sight and touch of a real copy of the Holy Scriptures seemed to reassure the little fellow, and, though still keeping close to her, he was quite ready when Michel returned with the panniers to help her to unpack and arrange their "house."

"I will lead Asino back through the forest and then let him go loose; he will easily find his way to the château," said Roussier, warned by the light breaking in the sky that it was time for him to go. "And, mademoiselle, though there is but little danger of any one venturing near the Bois Suaire, it were best to be prudent. Keep the boy quiet, and do not show yourselves in the open any more than you can help. When the darkness falls shut the cave entrance, it will be safe then to light the lamp and a fire also. Listen for the screech of the death-owl. When you hear it once, loud and long drawn out, that will mean all is well; but if the call come from a distance, and be three times quick and sharp repeated, put out your lights, remove all traces of your presence in the cave,

retire to its innermost recesses, and keep silent as death."

The girl nodded. Then, as the light from the lantern fell full upon Michel's face she exclaimed in distress, "Ah, Monsieur Roussier, how fatigued and ill you look! You have worn yourself out in being thus good and kind to us! And, in very deed, what should we have done without you? I cannot thank you, my heart is too full."

For a moment he held in his the hand she extended to him. "It is thanks enough, mademoiselle, that you trust me to serve you," he returned, his voice husky. Respectfully he raised the white hand to his lips; the next instant he was gone.

How the hours of that long day passed Azerole hardly knew. Happily Christophe, possessed of the idea that he was taking care of her, was sustained partly by the sense of his own importance as a knight, and partly from the childish enjoyment of the novelty of this strange picnic in a cave hiding-place, the secret of which was known only to kind Monsieur Roussier. Early in the evening, however, he grew drowsy, and was pleased enough to go to sleep on the make-shift for a bed which Azerole and he made up with moss and wraps.

For hours after Christophe had been asleep, Azerole, on her log seat, cowered shivering over the glowing embers on the hearth. Throughout the day she had kept up bravely, but now, sitting alone, watching and waiting for she knew not what, the darkness, the silence, the loneliness of the weird place took possession of her, and something of the horror with which she had

regarded the Haunted Cavern when she first set foot in it three years ago returned upon her in full force. She was fain at last to slip to her knees to seek the help of which she was in such sore need; nor did she seek in vain. Resuming her seat on the log, she told herself with an exultant smile that the key to this day's riddle was in safer hands than hers. And the thought brought peace, as it had often done before. Then her mind wandered from the two fugitives in the Bois Suaire to other captives no less lonely and anxious. There was her father, a prisoner for conscience' sake in Turin; there was Léon on the Rock of the Balsille; there were the two dear exiles waiting and praying in Wirtemberg; lastly there was — but now her heart throbbed wildly—there was that other lonely one in close ward, but where? mayhap in the citadel of Pinerolo. In vain she tried not to think of him; her heart for the time defied her will. She let her head fall on her hands, not seeing, yet shamefacedly conscious of her changing colour, and half indignantly she demanded of herself by what right she, Azerole Montoux, the Vaudoise, dared to think thus longingly of Gaston de Rohan. Had she not told herself and him two long years past that—that—it could never be?

In the midst of all else Azerole was anxiously mindful of poor Madame de Rohan. She would have been greatly startled had she seen in the gathering dusk the ponderous figure of "Monsieur Scaliger" riding up to the gate of Castel Brianza, and she would have trembled with apprehension had she heard the tones of his fierce voice demanding of poor scared Blaise an audience of

his lady mistress. But her heart would have beat with joyful relief had she been witness of the closing scene in the drama which was being enacted in the hall of the château half-an-hour later. In the stately bearing of the woman standing erect as a queen before him Basile de Mondovi could have detected but little trace of the terror which had agitated Héloise de Rohan on hearing of the arrival at her castle gates of Mondovi the Black. "Own the truth, and the God of truth Himself will support you," Azerole had said to her friend, and by Madame at this crucial moment the words had been remembered. With a sudden flash of joy it came to her that in her weakness, ay, even in her sinfulness, and that without the intervention of priest or sacrament, she, Héloise de Rohan, might go in the name of Christ to Him who had promised "I will help thee." Nor did she go in vain. And, when in her weakness she felt herself made strong, she proved indeed the faithfulness of Him that promised.

"Ma foi! Madame, but thanks to the blessed saints, the ill is like to turn out well. When I married the present comtesse I told her I had no son, and that hers, if she had one, would be Count de Mondovi after his father. Certes, for the sake of a miserable hunchback there would never have been a thought of ousting her boy—he is six months old now—but a pretty quandary I should have been in if all that you say be true of this Christophe, and he had indeed been Adèle's boy. Ma foi, Madame, as I tell you, my estates are in no condition to bear the strain of division. Mais voila! all is well that ends well."

There followed a few moments of silence while the count strode up and down the polished floor, and Blaise and Jacqueline, outside the door with their ears at the keyhole, ready at the first alarm to dash in to the rescue of their beloved mistress, drew a long breath of relief. Straightening themselves up, they looked one another silently in the face. There was no need for them to remain longer on guard, and Blaise, after a hard grip of his wife's hand, left her to wipe her eyes with her apron, while he hurried back to his post in the court. Nor was he a minute too soon, for on reaching the gate he heard the loud voice of Mondovi the Black bidding Madame a courteous adieu, and the next instant the visitor, vaulting into the saddle, tossed a piece of silver to the groom and another to Blaise, and rode off at a canter down the avenue, a grim smile on his dark face.

"Ma foi! but that is a fine woman, and a spirited one too!" he muttered to himself. Then for a moment his face sobered. "Eh bien! and so the little one lies with his mother under the sod at Mondovi! Ça, ça! it is better so. No hunchback could be heir to the house of Mondovi. Never! Eh bien, but certes, this has been not a bad afternoon's work! The saints grant us as rare success for to-night's sport!"

And with that Mondovi the Black, his momentary touch of feeling gone, put spurs to his horse, and set off at a gallop in the direction of Lucerna.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SPIRIT OF THE BOIS SUAIRE

"THIS way, monsieur, if you please."

De Coudre, the commandant's voice was barely civil, and he did not trouble himself to warn his visitor to mind his footing on the worn stone steps which they were ascending in semi-darkness, for the light carried by the officer of the garrison scarcely sufficed to illuminate the gloom. In point of fact Roussier, who had been on the strain since the preceding evening, was more exhausted than in his excitement he was conscious of. Moreover, a feeling of giddiness to which he had been liable of late when over-fatigued had seized him, and the sensation was not altogether a pleasant one to have while ascending a narrow tortuous, dark, and in many places, uneven stair. It was only by a tremendous effort of will that he succeeded in conquering the weakness that threatened to undo him. "Drunk, without doubt," contemptuously muttered the commandant to himself on hearing the sound of a second heavy stumble on Michel's part. Roussier thought the suggestion a happy one in the circumstances, accordingly thereafter he permitted himself the luxury of stumbling *ad libitum*.

At length they arrived at the iron-clamped door of the cell where the prisoner in the velvet mask was confined. Not a single warder had been met on the way; Monsieur de Coudre had taken care of that; and after a low knock the commandant noiselessly drew back one by one the heavy bolts that fastened the outer door. The steep pull had tried Michel, so that, what with gaspings for breath and mental agitation, his face had gained a convenient purple hue, while the vindictive grin he endeavoured to maintain was so unnatural in its stiffness that it showed the perfection of sardonic malevolence.

The cell, a fairly roomy apartment, was not altogether devoid of the necessary comforts. On a small table was a lamp, a book, and a chess-board on which the pieces stood as if the prisoner had left off in the middle of a game. Seated close by was a figure which, in spite of the velvet visor drawn completely over the face, Michel instinctively knew to be Gaston de Rohan. At a word, half apologetic, from the commandant the prisoner slowly removed his mask, and the one-time rivals confronted each other for a moment in silence.

Michel, who continued to stare with diabolical fixedness at his victim, contrived at last to place himself in front of the officer standing on guard at the door, and on the instant, changing his expression, Michel gave de Rohan a friendly signal with his eyes and lips. This signal, carefully practised beforehand, he made with the perfection of magic. Suspicious of foul play the commandant somewhat roughly requested him to draw

back a pace. Roussier at once complied, his face assuming its former ill-conditioned expression.

"Monsieur Gaston de Rohan," he hissed out, "I vowed to be one day revenged on you. I *am* revenged. To see you now in your humiliation—you, once the proud braggart, now the masked captive—certes, but this is sweet indeed!" He laughed, and the laugh, forced and overdone in his nervous eagerness to make it tell, got beyond his control, and rose to a scream so loud that the commandant in a fury seized him by the arm. There was no little risk that even through these massive walls the sound of that maniacal—or as Monsieur de Coudre would have said, drunken—laugh might be heard. But Roussier, wrenching himself free, turned upon him. "The five minutes are not up I tell you, and you had my word that I would do him no harm. Just let me make sure the captive's perch is too high for him to try and jump down one of these fine days." So saying he strode to the window at the further end of the cell. It was barred; but Michel saw at a glance the bars were rusty with age, it having been thought unnecessary to renew them owing to the great height of the turret and its sheer descent into the moat below. The prisoner of the velvet mask was the only one confined in that turret, and monsieur the commandant, if he remembered that the moat this season was dry, had not allowed himself to be agitated by the knowledge. The moon had risen, and Michel was able to note the exact position of the window. With a triumphant sneer he turned on his heel. "Your cage is

secure enough to satisfy even me, my fine bird," he said, nodding at de Rohan, who throughout had kept his eyes fixed on his tormentor, an expression on his unmasked face which it would have puzzled any one to read.

"Time is up," shortly observed the commandant, replacing in his doublet pocket his huge Geneva watch.

"Ça, ça, mon ami. I am ready," familiarly responded Michel, turning to follow the officer, who, with another muttered apology to his prisoner for the intrusion of this rude fellow, laid his hand on the door. Suddenly, as if remembering something he had well-nigh forgotten, Roussier dived into his pouch whence he produced a handful of loose coins. Selecting a large silver crown from the heap he contemptuously tossed it towards de Rohan. "Voilà," he said, and sneered again. But for the second time, adroitly turning his back to the officer of the garrison who was fumbling with the heavy bolts of the cumbrous door, he telegraphed another secret message of goodwill, curiously at variance with the marked incivility of his words and manner. "Monsieur, there was a day, you will remember it, when it pleased you to treat me with the scorn of a lord to the beggar at his feet. To-day it is my turn. Remember Vincennes!" Was there a reflection in the prisoner's eyes of the significant flash in Michel's? "Remember Vincennes!" he repeated, his glance meaningly directed towards the coin which had rolled under the table.

De Rohan coolly replaced his mask, as the door

creaked on its hinges and monsieur the commandant unceremoniously pushed Michel out. "Monsieur Roussier," said the prisoner, rising to his feet and bowing, "I shall remember Vincennes, and I shall remember you."

"What is that insolent jargon about Vincennes?" demanded the officer in disgust, as he rapidly led the way down the dark stairs, holding his lantern with a carelessness that showed his indifference to the safety of his drunken visitor's neck.

Michel chuckled viciously. "Ma foi! Have you never heard of the prison where the Prince of Condé, just such another swaggering braggadocio as this fellow, was fain to eat his heart out? I did Monsieur de Rohan the honour to hope that he might have as pleasant an experience as the prince, voilà tout!"

"Eh bien," grumbled the commandant, secretly relieved that the visit he had granted against his better judgment had passed off with no worse results than a fine display of insolence on the part of the visitor, "you had better come and have a glass of wine to cool your choler."

The invitation was declined with an ungraciousness fully equal to that with which it had been given, and in another minute Michel found himself in the outer court of the fortress, where a sleepy warder brought out his steed for him to mount.

Trotting leisurely towards a copse where a stout nag was tethered, he fastened his own to a neighbouring tree. Next he proceeded to a clump of bracken, drew from under it a bundle secreted there, and donned the

garments it contained, namely a labourer's slouching hat and cotton blouse. The remaining contents of the bundle, a strong file, and a long thick coil of rope, he concealed about his person. Rapidly retracing his steps to the citadel, he cautiously made his way to the back of the building, and with some difficulty clambered down the slimy sides of the fosse, at the bottom of which he crouched out of sight. The next instant there rose upon the still night air the cry of the death-owl, and, before many seconds had passed, Michel's straining ears caught the faint irregular click of something tap-tapping the wall above his head. On it came, ever nearer, something light and metallic blown against the masonry by the wind which was rising. A few more seconds, and there brushed against his upturned face little Christophe's silver crown, to which was attached the strong silk thread Roussier had secreted inside the make-believe coin.

To this thread Michel fastened a cord, to the end of that again the file and rope. The latter he had knotted at intervals to afford some slight support to hands and feet. With the jerking of the thread to intimate that all was ready there rose again the hoot of the owl. Slowly but steadily the thread, then the cord, and finally the rope were drawn through his guiding hands. When only the knotted end was left, Michel crouched down again in his place of concealment behind a heap of rubbish and waited breathlessly for the sound of the file at work far overhead. He heard, or fancied he heard it, but the wind had risen higher, and only between the gusts could any

noise be distinguished. The time of waiting seemed interminable. Hours were passing he told himself, and on his forehead the beads of perspiration stood thickly.

In reality but one hour had passed when there came a swaying to and fro of the rope, which told him that it was being fastened at the upper end, and presently he caught above the sighing of the wind in the trees a faint whistle accompanied by a sudden jerking of the knot he held, and he knew the moment had come. Slipping his feet, which were encased in strong leather riding-boots, through the noose he had made at the end of the rope, he lay down flat on the ground and placed his feet firmly against a low parapet of broken wall over-topping the fosse on its outer side, a device of his own by which the rope would be kept clear of the battlements and the descent made easier. The hoot of the owl, the signal as before that all was ready, was almost instantly followed by a violent jerk that well-nigh lifted Michel from the ground. The strain on the rope was tremendous. His strength was tried to the utmost, and he was thankful when the knots on the rope gave him, no less than the fugitive, a minute's breathing space. This time the seconds passed like hours, until the moment when Roussier heard something drop with a dull thud beside him, and found the tension relaxed with a suddenness that threw him backwards. The same instant he was helped to his feet by a hand that grasped his, and from the touch he knew the fingers were wet.

But there was no time to think either of de Rohan's

bleeding hands or of his own aching and stiffened feet. Without a word breathed between them he led the way along the bottom of the moat to the point where they could steal across the open, keeping well under the trees which skirted the road, until they came to the copse where the horses were standing in sleepy contentment. In a flash both men were in the saddle and galloping like riders possessed along the road to the west. On and on they rode, not a word spoken, every nerve on the strain, and within an hour and a half of starting from Pinerolo the panting beasts were pulled up at the outskirts of the Bois Suaire.

Dismounting, the two riders confronted each other in the moonlight. If there had been any lingering taint of the old jealous hatred towards Gaston de Rohan in the breast of Michel Roussier, the look in the face of the man he had saved must have swept it away. Gazing into the clear, honest, kindly eyes of his rival Michel read the nobleness of the soul behind them, a nobleness he instinctively felt would not shrink from calling even such an one as he "brother." The two clasped hands; neither found it easy just then to speak. But Roussier, who knew there was still much to be done and but little time to spare, was the first to rouse himself to action. Taking the horses aside into a thicket, where, beyond sight and sound, they could rest and graze, he produced from his saddle-bag what looked like a roll of linen, thrust it under his arm, and led the way into the forest. While they were following the path he was now so familiar with, he rapidly sketched the next part of the programme

giving his companion minute directions concerning the part he was to play. Gaston, recognising that some momentous crisis was at hand, listened attentively, and his spirits, untamed even by nine months' imprisonment, rose in the anticipation of a daring adventure to such a high pitch that even the uncanny eerieness of the Haunted Forest at this hour of shadowy gloom had no effect upon him. "Within the hour, monsieur, you may hear the signal," said Roussier, when he had arrived at the spot where he was to leave de Rohan and retrace his steps to Malanot.

In an outhouse near by the farm he met, according to appointment, Monsieur l'Abbé Têtu and the Count de Mondovi, both carefully disguised. Cautiously and in silence, the trio made their way to the forest. The two Frenchmen, albeit they had fortified themselves with a good draught of spirits ere leaving the monastery, began in their secret hearts to quail at the task before them no sooner had the gloomy outline of the Bois Suaire loomed in front of them, and it was with a touch of irritated admiration that Alphonse Têtu thought of Brother Thomas, who had found himself much too ill to form one of the expedition. Before entering the wood Roussier lit the lantern he carried, then, taking the lead as before, proceeded with slow carefulness towards the densest part of the wood. It was pitch dark, for a cloud had come over the moon, and the tall trees met in an impenetrable screen overhead. All around there was a deathly stillness that seemed only the more awful when broken now and again by the snapping of a

dry twig above their heads or under their stealthy footsteps.

They had been walking about half-an-hour when Roussier suddenly halted and turned, so that a fitful gleam from the lantern should fall upon his face, which he had rubbed over with a little flour as he plodded along. Murmuring through his teeth, that were chattering with an unnatural violence, "Did you not see something yonder?" he pointed towards a thicket of black darkness right ahead of them.

"Fool!" muttered the abbé, but the frank compliment, no less than the count's smothered oath, betrayed a certain accent of wavering uneasiness which Roussier was quick to detect.

He took another few steps forward, and again stopped short.

"Fool!" snarled the abbé for the second time. "What is it?"

"I thought I saw something," stammered their guide in a weak, terrified voice. "And—and—certes, but in this confounded darkness I am uncertain of the paths, although by daylight I know them well."

Suddenly his arm was gripped. "See here, craven," the furious voice was that of Mondovi the Black, "this showing of the white feather will not do. Another moment and you will be backing out of the wood and the whole concern. Stir but one step to the rearward and you are a dead man," concluded the count, giving Michel a momentary vision of the glitter of cold steel.

In an utter collapse of terror the latter flung him-

self on the ground clasping the count's knees. "Holy Mother of God, monsieur, threaten no deed of violence in this place! It was here, somewhere near this very spot, that the foul murder was committed but thirty years since. They say the tortured spirit of the fratricide that haunts the forest leaves unmolested none save those whose hands are not red with blood. But, if one who has the stain of murder on his hands or in his heart enters the Bois Suaire, he and those with him are lost. Hist! what is that?"

It was the turn of the Abbé Têtu to turn livid with fear. "Him whose hands are red — him who has murder in his heart—!" In the name of all the foul fiends what had possessed him to enter this accursed wood? He drew the count aside. "De Mondovi," he whispered, but with difficulty, for his lips had stiffened, "this fool is beside himself with terror. It is of no use trusting to him. Let us turn——"

Under his breath the savage count swore again. "Certes, the place is not too much to my liking, that is the naked truth. Let us go back."

Roussier, when commanded to lead the way out of the forest, obeyed with professed alacrity. For a few hundred yards he went steadily, then, stopping short in front of a tree with a curiously twisted trunk, muttered doubtfully to himself, "Ecco! but did not we pass that old fir five minutes since?"

"Fool! Have you lost your bearings again?" and Monsieur l'Abbé shook the young man roughly.

Apparently exasperated, Roussier made a faint show of spirit. "And I think it were no marvel, messieurs, if I

have. What between the fiend-spirits of the wood, and him who threatens my life in return for having risked my own for him and you, Monsieur l'Abbé, 'twould scarce be a miracle were I to lose not my bearings only but my senses," concluded Michel, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"The fellow is right, Alphonse," whispered the count. "Peste! but we are not likely to get clear of this ill-omened hole by bullying him out of the little sense that still remains in him."

Handing the lantern towards the count, Michel murmured, "I will creep through this tangle of a thicket, and if, as I believe, the ground opens somewhat on the other side, then I know my way. Do not move from this spot, messieurs. I will return in three minutes."

Blind guide of the blind as he appeared to be, Roussier's departure by no means tended to allay the rapidly increasing uneasiness of the pair now left alone together. The two or three minutes of his absence seemed interminable, and a horrible suspicion that some mischance had befallen him, and that they were doomed to stand there for ever began to creep over them both. Silently they looked one another in the face, and, moved by the same impulse, they took a step forward. At the same instant, roused apparently by their sudden movement, a death-owl not far distant uttered its lugubrious, long-drawn-out screech, which it repeated thrice. The sound, so shrill that it seemed to penetrate into the furthest depths of the forest, reached the watching ears of Azerole in the Haunted

Cavern; and at once with the can of water standing in readiness she had dashed out the smouldering fire, dragged the panniers out of sight, tossed the twigs and moss about the floor, and, snatching up Christophe, retreated with him in her arms into the inner recesses of the cave, there in the darkness to wait and to pray.

In the forest the silence and the darkness were profounder still, for in the hearts of the abbé and his companion there breathed no word of prayer. Each was well aware of the other's terror. Both would have given worlds to flee from the place, but their feet seemed glued to the spot on which they stood. Suddenly a ghostly whisper sounded close at hand. "This way, messieurs, to the right." It was Roussier, but the abbé started, as if the voice that spoke had been that of the Evil One himself. Hurriedly the count, still carrying the lantern, went forward as Michel had directed, but the next instant, his foot catching in a skilfully twisted bramble-trail, he stumbled and fell heavily. Between them the other two dragged him up, stiff and bruised, but otherwise uninjured.

"Per baccho! but the light is gone out!" ejaculated Roussier, picking up the lantern he had helped to batter with a well-directed kick. "But it matters not," he murmured in a more confident tone, "I have found the track, and see, the moon is coming forth again, or is it mayhap the coming of the dawn?" he soliloquised uneasily; "I have lost count of the time. But—but—Mother of God! messieurs, look!" he shrieked, pointing to a glade far behind them. "May the blessed saints preserve us!" he whispered hoarsely, still pointing

with an arm that seemed to have become suddenly paralysed; "but this is no moon—it is—it is——"

Turning precipitately, his companions gazed in the direction indicated by his outstretched hand, and, from out the sombre obscurity of a distant avenue, their horror-stricken eyes saw a tall, ghostly apparition advancing upon them like a phantom with outstretched arms. And now, catching sight of its victims, the spectre, uttering blood-curdling yells of demoniacal laughter, advanced with a stealthy swiftness that was something between flying and swimming, the folds of its shadowy wrappings floating like a white mist-shroud over its head.

What happened next even Roussier was never able distinctly to remember. Seizing a hand of each of his companions,he partly led, partly dragged them in a dumb stupor of fright on and on through the Haunted Forest, taking care to follow a path tortuous enough to make the way seem interminable. The dawn was breaking by the time he brought them to the outskirts of the wood. The goal reached, Roussier's powers with convenient abruptness gave way, and with a groan he fell prone, apparently in a swoon. The others, consumed with a burning concern for themselves, decided to leave him to his fate, a proceeding Michel had anticipated. He lay motionless until the sound of their hurrying footsteps had completely died away, then, cautiously raising his head, he had the satisfaction of seeing them in the dim distance like two faint specks flying before the wind. For some little time longer he remained where he had fallen on the cold, marshy

ground on the edge of the forest, strangely loath to move, though why he could hardly have told. In truth, now that the tension of the night was over, Roussier was about to find out that, not in semblance but in reality, he was physically and mentally exhausted. A glance at the breaking sky, however, brought him to his feet at length with a compunctious recollection of the three who were waiting anxiously for his signal of reassurance. Not without effort, for he was stiff and aching all over, he plunged once more into the depths of the forest, and after a quick run he climbed a tree and awoke the sleeping echoes of the Bois Suaire with the single hoot of the death-owl. From a point some little distance off it was returned. Descending, and following the sound, Michel made for the spot where the dread Spirit of the Haunted Forest had appeared, and before long he descried it hurrying to meet him. A few minutes more and the spectre, with a shout of uproarious laughter, flung its arms about Roussier, wrapping him round and round in the folds of the great sheet in which it was enveloped, and the mirthful voice of Gaston de Rohan demanded, "Eh bien, mon ami, but did I not do my part well? Ha! ha! I scared your banditti off the ground like withered leaves before a hurricane! It was rare sport! But, in the name of wonder, who or what are the brigands after here?"

"Holà! monsieur, but how can I speak inside a shroud?" asked Michel, struggling with the sheet. No sooner was he free than he advanced a step or two, and ascending a slight rising ground in the open, uttered

again the owl's single hoot. This time there was no reply; but, apparently satisfied, Michel descended, and feeling the need of support, linked his arm in de Rohan's, and led the way in the direction of the torrent bed. "Eh bien, monsieur, come and I will show you the prey these brigands were after," he said, but speaking slowly, for his breath came laboured. "Of set purpose I did not tell you before. I knew your nerve would be all the better for the game you had to play if you did not know just *how* much was actually at stake."

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE BETHEL CAVERN

"COMMENT, chéri! Art crying, little man? Truly thou wilt make this damp cave still more damp."

Christophe caught at the suggestion contained in the raillery. "That is just it," he said, hastily swallowing a lump in his throat. "The water trickles down everywhere, and down my cheeks also. Voilà tout. But—but I do not like this black hole, Azerole."

"Cuddle up closer to me. See, this warm cloak of Madame's makes a tent for both of us to creep under. Ah, now that is better," Azerole went on cheerily, as the child, closing his eyes tightly, "to shut out the dark," so he said, snuggled down in the cosy nest she made for him within her arms. "Now I will tell you over again the story of the brave man who hid like us in a dark cave from the wicked king who was trying to kill him."

"I know," struck in Christophe brightly. "And God stood at the entrance of the cave to mount sentry-guard. Bravo! and so David was safe as safe, and King Saul could not find him. What did David say to himself, I wonder, when he was waiting in the dark?"

"Perchance he whispered, 'What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee,'" the girl replied softly.

"Azerole," Christophe spoke in an awe-struck tone, "do you think the good God is standing out yonder at our cave door this night?"

"I do, chéri." And the word of assurance brought comfort to the speaker's own heart.

There was a pause, and then the child, pushing aside the cloak, bent forward and said in his clear treble, "Our Father God, we do thank Thee, me and Azerole, this night." Then laying down his head again on his governess's shoulder, he fell asleep. His slumbers were but light, however, for the hoot of the owl roused him, and he started up from an uneasy dream with the cry, "I want to go home to Madame Héloise. She asked me to call her 'mother,' but—but I did not; I know not why. I must return to the château and say it now. I *must,* Azerole," he reiterated excitedly. "I will come back quick after I have kissed her and called her mother."

The owl's cry had been the signal that all was well, but Azerole, herself unnerved by that long night of watching, feared to move until reassured, and the dread of Christophe's agitation getting beyond his own and her control rendered her desperate. "Hush, hush, little man. Yes, you shall go back; but first, I have another story to tell you. It is about a beautiful lady and her little son. Once upon a time—it is now some ten years since—the good God gave to this beautiful madame a baby boy. Ah, how she loved her baby! He was only a cripple hunchback—so people said—but

she loved him all the more for that. Well, she found out that cruel, bad men wanted to take her baby from her. She was afraid, and so she ran away with him, and never told any one he was her own little son, but she called him by another name, and allowed everybody to think he was somebody else's baby. She did that to save him, you know. Eh bien, time went on, and he grew quite straight and strong, until at ten years old he could walk like a man. Then the beautiful madame heard that the bad men had found out where she lived, and were coming for her boy. She got frightened again, and she asked a—a—some one who loved her, and who loved her child also, to take and hide him in a cave until the cruel men were gone away. And in her château madame sits alone and prays to the good God to keep her little son safe in his hiding-place. And——"

The tale got no further, for Christophe, with sparkling eyes and quivering lips, had gripped her round the neck, almost strangling her in his eagerness.

"Then it is true? She meant it, and I am her own Christophe?" And although assured of this by Azerole, he kept repeating to himself over and over again, "I am, madame, my mother's own son, Christophe!" Finally, a new idea striking him, he asked, "What, then, is my real name?"

"Christophe de Beaurégard de Rohan," she replied.

He made no response, nor was it long after this before the little fellow, worn out by the very efforts he made to grasp in all its magnitude the meaning for him of this good news, fell into the dreamless

sleep of utter exhaustion. Azerole, afraid to disturb him, sat on in her cramped position, her ears strained to catch the slightest sound from without the cavern, little knowing that, even while she waited with a hope deferred that went to making her heart sick, there stood not a stone's-throw distant two men, both of whom for love of her would willingly have laid down their lives.

"Yonder narrow slit in the rocks, monsieur, that is the entrance to the cave. You will find her there."

On the face of Gaston de Rohan there was a deep flush, and he looked as if about to make one spring towards the spot indicated by Roussier, when a movement on the part of his guide checked him. "Comment, man! you are not turning back? Certes, for our sakes at least you must come on to yonder goal. So far as thanks can pay a mighty debt, ours—that is mine and hers—are owing to you for this and last night's work, mon ami."

Michel brushed his hand across his forehead. "No, monsieur, no," he huskily rejoined. "I want no thanks. My work is done. I will go home and rest." The last words had a touch of weariness in them. De Rohan looked keenly at him. "Roussier, you are not well. These two days have taken it out of you. I——"

Michel interrupted. "They have taken the fiend out of me, I trow. Time was, monsieur captain," he went on with slow deliberateness, "time was when I would sooner have killed you with my own hand than have brought you here to—to—*her*," he waved his hand towards the cave.

Suddenly the hand was taken in the strong grip of Gaston's left. "Roussier! noble fellow that you are, I never dreamt of this! So that was the torture that maddened you! What a heartless brute you must have thought me!" And with much feeling Gaston wrung again and again the hand he held.

Michel leant against the rock beside him, his face growing pale, though a little smile was on his lips. "It is better so, monsieur, better so. I was worse than a fool to have dreamed of aught else. And you need not fret for me, monsieur. I am content. I have no sister, and like a sister she has cared for me. You will not grudge me that I know, Gaston de Rohan. Perchance it will not be for long."

Without another word he turned and began to climb the rocks by which they had descended. Silently, for his heart was too full to speak, de Rohan helped him up. At the top Michel paused a moment. "I thank you, monsieur," he panted. "I am all right now. Go to her. She will be growing anxious."

At the words de Rohan's heart gave a bound, nevertheless he would have insisted upon accompanying Roussier even to Malanot if need be; but Michel would not hear of such a thing, enforcing his refusal of further assistance with a touch of his old brusqueness of manner.

Gaston watched him out of sight among the thick undergrowth of the forest, then turned, and, throwing himself from the giddy heights with reckless haste, scrambled along the rocky bed of the torrent, heedless now of every one and everything save her who, all

unconscious, was keeping her lonely vigil in the cave. Pushing aside the rude door, he stood at the entrance and peered with beating heart into the darkness beyond. The stillness, the emptiness struck upon him with a sudden chill. "Mademoiselle! Azerole!" he called, his voice unsteady.

Azerole, whose listening ears had caught the sound of approaching footsteps, had laid Christophe gently down, and risen noiselessly to her feet. But now, at the sound of that low call, her throbbing pulses seemed to stop. That voice! Ah! well she knew it! How it thrilled her! It was *his!* Softly, swiftly she glided from her hiding-place, her pale face lit up with such a radiance of gladness that when she came forth from out the shadowy darkness and stood before him she appeared to him like an angel of light. For a moment Gaston stood gazing, the next she was clasped in his arms. "My darling! my darling! Nothing can separate us now, sweetheart, nothing but God Himself. And He will not, for it is He who has brought us to each other at last!" he murmured, holding her fast.

Azerole lay passive, her stunned senses slow to recover themselves. His words kept repeating themselves in her ears—"God has brought us to each other. God Himself." Were these words, in very truth, the words of Gaston de Rohan? Involuntarily she repeated them aloud in a tone of hushed wonder—"God—God Himself—*your* God, monsieur?"

"Yes, my Azerole. It is God, our Father God, through Christ His Son and my Saviour, who has led me to Himself. It was His will that your little

hand, my Azerole, should be the first to point out the way; and ever since He has been leading me on. True, it proved a crooked path, and rough at times, but it brought me straight to Him in the end; and, when I look back along the road by which He drew me on, my heart has room only for gratitude for His kind leading."

It was too much. The girl's overwrought feelings gave way, and, hiding her head on his shoulder, she broke down, weeping unrestrainedly. Gaston hardly knew whether his task of comforting her brought with it more of pain or of pleasure.

An hour later, when Christophe awoke, and greatly wondering why he was in darkness and alone, emerged from the cave, and called aloud for Azerole with all the injured dignity of one who has a grievance, he was amazed to find his mademoiselle and Gaston sitting outside in the sunshine, her head leaning against him, his supporting arm thrown round her. At his cry of delight they looked up, and Gaston, with a curious stiffness of movement, opened wide his other arm.

"Eh bien, little-man-Christophe! And is this really you yourself, walking so tall and straight? Comment! is it that you are so surprised at the sight of me that you cannot find even one word of welcome?" he added, playfully pulling the little fellow's curly locks.

"No," returned Christophe gravely, "I am not surprised. Azerole always said you would come back, and we had asked the good God many times. I am glad, too glad it must needs be, for some thing inside of me—my heart, I think—ached, and I could not speak." A

like dumbness for the moment seemed to afflict the captain, for, drawing the child closer, he kissed his forehead in silence. But Christophe wrenched himself away. "Let me go! Let me go by myself!" he cried almost fiercely. "I am beginning to cry, and I must not. I am a man now. I can walk."

Gaston let him go, and he limped quickly out of sight, coming back in a few minutes with reddened eyelids to stand and stare fixedly at Gaston, a curious expression on his wise little face. It might have struck Azerole what the boy's thought would be, but it did not until he began to speak with the slowness of intense satisfaction. "You are my *real* brother now, Gaston de Rohan, do you know?"

"Comment! is the little man's head turned, or is it but a case of affection begetting relationship?" asked de Rohan amused.

Hastily drawing Christophe aside, Azerole whispered—

"Listen, chéri. Gaston—I mean Monsieur de Rohan—does not yet know aught. I think Madame your mother would like to tell him the story herself. Can you wait?"

Christophe nodded. "I am a man," he said, drawing himself up. "Men keep secrets," and, taking her hand, walked back to where the captain sat, in a reverie of perfect bliss, judging by the seraphic expression on his face. For some little time silence reigned between the three. Gaston broke it at last.

"Still too happy to speak, little man?" he demanded, with another mischievous tweak of the golden curls that lay dangerously near his fingers.

"Yes, too happy and too afraid!" sighed the boy. "I have such a fear that, were I to open my mouth but for a moment, the words of a great secret might run out. I am not safe!" And he sighed again oppressed.

A happy thought struck Azerole. "It is quite time you opened your mouth to eat some breakfast, little man. And ah, how thoughtless of me," she added with sudden compunction, "not to think sooner of this! When did *you* have any food, monsieur?" she asked, getting hurriedly to her feet.

He only laughed, protesting that he could not be expected to remember the exact date of unimportant incidents that happened somewhere in the dark ages, then rising, followed her into the "commissariat," as he called the cave. And before long the trio were having in the open air their impromptu breakfast, the very eating of which did much to restore them to their natural selves, and relieve them from the nervous tension which was having an almost benumbing effect upon their joy.

But no sooner was Christophe's hunger appeased than for the third time he heaved a sigh. "We are keeping our gladness to ourselves. When can we go back to mother?"

De Rohan noticed the unwonted expression, but the thought that passed through his mind was merely one of relief that the stiff title of "madame" had been dropped by the child. The question recalled Michel. "Monsieur Roussier promised to return. But I fear he will find he is unable to do so. He was looking far from well, poor fellow. If we hear nothing from him

before nightfall, I shall make my way under cover of the darkness to Castel Brianza. It would hardly be prudent in the light of day, unless I was desirous of running my head against the officers of justice from the citadel of Pinerolo, sent in search of their prisoner of the velvet mask."

Christophe, having finished his last mouthful of bread and chicken, was regarding the captain critically. "You are eating with your left hand and it is tied up, and your right arm has become unjointed. Why is it so, Gaston?"

The young soldier answered lightly, "This"—he touched his limp right arm—"was the work of a bullet that hit an awkward place, and this," moving his bandaged hand, "was scratched a little in grasping a rope doubly tight to save the other arm."

The answer reminded Christophe that Gaston had the story of his adventures to relate, and he begged the captain to let them have it now. Reading a similar request in Azerole's face, de Rohan yielded to the boy's entreaty that he would tell everything from the very beginning. Adjourning to a shady nook under a rock which afforded a welcome shelter from the now blazing sun, they esconced themselves in comfort. The time passed quickly after that; none of the three indeed guessed how quickly. Christophe lying flat on the turf, his chin propped upon his hands, his delicate little face flushed with interest and excitement, listened breathlessly, while Azerole, now gazing into her lover's eyes, now letting her own drop shyly beneath his tender glance, listened no less absorbedly.

Suddenly a shout startled them, and the three sprang to their feet. It could be none other than Roussier they told themselves. Nevertheless, with the instinct of those in hiding, they looked with an anxious gaze in the direction from whence had come the sound, prepared to retreat into the cave if danger threatened. From behind the shelter of the towering rocks they had a full view of the river-bed, but Gaston, his height giving him a superior vantage-post of observation, was the first to see and recognise the tall, lithe figure leaping with the surefootedness of a chamois from rock to rock in the bed of the torrent. "Léon! Léon Montoux!" he joyfully exclaimed, then, his quick instinct telling him what had driven the colour from Azerole's cheeks, he threw his arm about her and held her close. "Courage, ma mie! Please God, he brings not evil tidings but good."

The next minute Léon, dashing up the face of the rocks, joined them on the bank. Hands clasped hands, but not a word was spoken, the cave-dwellers staring hard at their visitor while he recovered his breath. He was thin, his face browned and roughened by exposure to wind, snow and rain, and his clothes bore visible signs of that terrible midnight descent from the Rock of the Balsille by which God so miraculously preserved the noble band of Vaudois patriots; but he was the same Léon, only transformed by the glow of triumph that lit up his manly face.

"Saved! all saved!" he panted at last, with a wave of his battered hat. "Our valleys restored to us! our liberties assured!" Broken, incredulous exclamations

interrupted him. Léon laughed joyously at their amazed faces. "Duke Amadeus has broken with his most Christian Majesty of France, and he, our Prince, is pleased to declare that in proof of his confidence in his brave Vaudois subjects, hitherto misunderstood and wronged by him, he entrusts to them the defence of his western frontier." Almost choking with a rush of emotion, Léon stopped short. "Thanks be to God, the God of the Vaudois!" he said, with hushed reverence, his head bowed.

"Thanks be to God," echoed de Rohan, taking off his hat, an example immediately and scrupulously followed by Christophe.

For a full minute no one spoke. Azerole broke the silence. "Our father, Léon?"

He smiled. "The prisoners are immediately to be set at liberty, by order of his highness. And who, think you, sister mine, who is it that has gone to Turin to await the opening of the prison-door, declaring that he, and none but he, shall be the one to restore the pastor of Ponefrà to his long-lost children?" She shook her head. "Who but our good Bersour?" An exclamation of mingled gladness and amazement broke from Azerole. "Faithful Jules! he went to Marseilles seeking for my father, who was believed to have been sent to the galleys. The trooper's interest in the heretics aroused suspicion, and eventually he was himself condemned to the fate he feared had overtaken Pastor Montoux. Chained at the oar to one of our Vaudois martyrs, he would make no attempt to escape until his fellow-sufferer had passed beyond the reach of his help.

Then, thanks under God to his own cleverness and physical strength, he regained his freedom, made his way to Switzerland, heard of the 'Rentrée Glorieuse,' and hurried to give his help to us on the Rock of the Balsille."

Azerole tried to speak her joy, but the attempt proved a failure. Oppressed with a burden of happiness greater than she well knew how to bear, she hid her face against de Rohan's shoulder. Léon was for the first time suddenly struck by the situation—Azerole's clinging dependence, Gaston's air of protection, his arm thrown round her. Léon looked from one to the other stupefied.

De Rohan with a physical effort held out his right hand. "It is all right, my brother. Congratulate me. You thought Léon Montoux to be this day the happiest man in the world; but you must needs see for yourself you can come out but second on the list so long as Gaston de Rohan stands before you."

The young Vaudois wrung the hand he grasped, then turned to his sister. "Chérie, sister mine! Is it indeed so?" he exclaimed; then, taking her from Gaston, he in his turn clasped her in his arms. "Vraiment, how amazingly blind I have been! And you, ma mie, how you must have suffered in silence!" She did not speak; she could not.

Christophe was the first to break the silence. He had been a highly interested but somewhat bewildered spectator of all that had been going on, listening with all his ears, and staring with mystified eyes first at one and then at the other of his three friends. With a

flash of inspiration he now jumped to what he believed was the explanation of the whole situation. "I see that you have found out that we are all each other's brothers and sisters. Gaston is mine, and I think he thinks he is Azerole's, and so you also must be mine, Monsieur Montoux—no, Léon I mean, since you are my brother. Certes, I think," he went on, unconscious that he had got a little mixed, "I think, now that Azerole and I have both of us so many brothers and sisters each, we do not need to be afraid of the Abbé Têtu or anybody."

"The Abbé Têtu?" repeated Léon inquiringly. "Ah, then he is at the bottom of your being in hiding here in the Bois Suaire, is he? I only stopped at the château long enough to leave my poor spent nag with Blaise, and to receive his confidential assurance that I should find mademoiselle at 'the trysting-place.'"

Matters were quickly explained to him. Léon listened to the account of Alphonse Têtu's little schemes with a grim smile. "The abbé's game is about played out this time, I warrant," he said, considerable satisfaction in his tone. "I met him and his party, some thirty strong, riding for their lives in the direction of the Julian Pass. And they have need. All Piedmont is up in arms against the French. The abbé and his followers will be nearing the Alps by now, if our people have not already caught and scattered them."

At this Christophe's face suddenly lit up. "Azerole, if they are gone, we can all go back to the château."

"The little man is right," said de Rohan. "There is nothing to fear for any of us, not even for me. A

prisoner, whose nationality is as much Piedmontese as French, and who has just escaped from Pinerolo, the citadel of the enemy, is likely at the present crisis to be regarded with favour by Duke Amadeus. He——"

But Christophe waited to hear no more. He set off at his quickest trot for the cavern. "I am going for my cloak and stick," he called back. "I must hasten home. Mother will be watching for me to return to her."

CHAPTER XXVI

A DEBTOR RELEASED

FULLY three months had elapsed since the "Rentrée Glorieuse," and much had taken place during that time. How the Vaudois fought in defence of their duke, risking their lives on behalf of a prince who had at last done tardy justice to their loyalty and courage; how in conjunction with Amadeus's troops they drove the French through the defile of La Croix; how they successfully attacked the forts of San Michel and La Torre, and eventually rid the country of the country, are now matters of history.

Nor had these months proved uneventful to our friends at Brianza. Not many days after Léon brought the news of Victor Amadeus's reconciliation with his Vaudois subjects, Jules Bersour arrived at Malanot with Pastor François Montoux. At the courteous request of Madame de Rohan and her son, and to the unspeakable delight of Azerole, M. Montoux consented to take up his residence for the present at the château until he should have somewhat recovered from the effects of the winter's rigorous imprisonment.

But not for long could the pastor remain inactive at Castel Brianza. Reinforcements flocked daily to the Vaudois standard, taxing the generalship of Henri

Arnaud to the utmost. Moreover, arrangements had to be made for fetching back from Switzerland and Germany the remainder of the Vaudois exiles, including the families of those already in the valleys. Arnaud waited impatiently for the counsel and help of his colleague, and the latter, as soon as he was able, answered his friend's urgent summons to come to him at his headquarters in Torre Pelice.

Léon would fain have accompanied his father; but it was impressed upon him that he ought not to leave Malanot, where for the present he was sorely needed, not only on account of M. Broussel, whose health still remained feeble, but because of Roussier. Michel was far from well, and Léon was anxious about him. Not that there was any great alteration in the young man's appearance or manner calculated at the first to excite alarm. He himself made light of his ailments, and, far from being depressed, his spirits were so much more even than in the old days that for a time every one but himself and Léon was deceived. But Léon knew that there were nights when Roussier hardly slept for a hacking cough, that he was losing strength and flesh, slowly, it is true, but surely, and that the slightest exertion was enough to bring on a fit of distressing exhaustion. Greatly to the relief of the young Vaudois, who soon began to find his powers overtaxed in the endeavour to fulfil the duties of his threefold office of farmer, secretary, and sick-nurse, Jules Bersour stepped into the breach by offering to fill the post of "handy-man" to M. Broussel throughout the summer. Only too thankfully was the offer accepted. Nor was

it by the farmer and Léon only that this opportune help was welcomed, for, as the time went on, and Roussier's nights grew more rather than less trying, the trooper's skill and strength as an attendant proved invaluable to the sufferer, who hardly knew how great his need had been until he found that need supplied by the kind-hearted giant.

In other circumstances it is probable that Michel's condition would sooner have struck Gaston and Azerole, who had both apprehended mischief to the young fellow in consequence of the fatigue and exposure of these two days and nights of toil on their behalf. But Roussier's uniform cheerfulness, the unavoidable absorption of other interests crowding upon the stirring weeks after the Rentrée, and their own exceeding happiness, made the two less keen-sighted, perhaps, than they might have been. That summer of 1690 had been to Azerole Montoux months of almost unclouded sunshine. In these days she had grown young again. The light had come back to her eyes, the colour to her cheeks, the old elasticity to her step, and as she went about the château, filling the great old house with the music of her song, she was once more Azerole, the blithe-hearted "Azerole, la belle des Valleys."

It is true that one great joy had been perforce postponed. Among the children of the little community of Vaudois exiles in Wirtemberg, there had broken out in the month of July an epidemic of scarlet fever, and little Stella Montoux was one of those who had sickened, though happily not seriously, with the dread complaint. Thus both she and her mother were prevented from

accompanying their fellow-countrymen who were hastening from all parts of Switzerland and Germany to rejoin their husbands, fathers, and brothers, anxiously awaiting them in their beloved valleys. For the present, at least, Madame Montoux and Azerole must needs possess themselves in patience and await God's time for the reunion to which the heart of mother and child had been looking forward with well-nigh unbearable longing.

But Gaston would not allow Azerole to fret. "Courage, sweetheart!" he had said. "If the dear mother and the petite are not able to come before the winter sets in, then we — you and I — ma mie, will go to Wirtemberg on our wedding journey."

And at that Azerole had been fain to hide her April face of tears and blushing smiles from her knight's too close inspection.

To Gaston de Rohan no less than to Azerole Montoux those months of summer had proved wondrously bright, and that too in spite of the disappointments and anxieties that pressed him hard at times. His injured arm, which had suffered in consequence of the unavoidable strain to which it had been subjected on the night of his escape from the citadel of Pinerolo, slowly regained lost ground, but there the improvement stopped, notwithstanding the skill and unwearied efforts of his old friend M. Vaux. It was with heart-felt regret that the surgeon found himself compelled at last to break the truth to his patient. "I fear you will never again be able to wield your sword to such good purpose as at Frankenthal, monsieur le capitaine," he said one

day, hiding his sympathy under an extra show of brusqueness.

This verdict was to be recognised later on as a blessing in disguise; but at the present juncture it seemed not good but unmitigated evil, and the old surgeon marvelled that the brilliant young officer took it so quietly. "You were not wont to chafe so meekly, monsieur," he remarked, with a keen side-look at de Rohan. "I should have expected you to see that this was the occasion for anathematising stray bullets."

De Rohan smiled. "I have learnt to see further afield than I was wont to do, monsieur. The religion of——"

"Tiens!" hastily interrupted the other, with good-natured roughness. "It is clear you have not yet learnt to see a pitfall when it yawns at your feet. The less you tell me of your religion the better for your own sake, mon ami." And Gaston, smiling again, took the hint.

But in the ilex grove, where he and Azerole had wandered together that afternoon, the captain's smile came less readily. Apparently preoccupied, he allowed the conversation to fall chiefly upon Azerole, until she began to tell him of Michel, who had seemed considerably worse on the previous day when she had seen him. Then de Rohan roused himself. With tender regret they talked of Roussier, who had been visibly failing since an attack of hæmorrhage some ten days before; and although they did not say it in words, it was evident from the tone of their remarks that their hope of the invalid's ultimate recovery was fading fast.

By-and-by the talk drifted into other channels. De Rohan told Azerole of the communication he had just received from Signor Bocelli, who was at present in Paris looking after the affairs of his young client. It was clear from the letter that even the sanguine old advocate was by no means confident of being able to circumvent the schemes of the enemies of the house of de Rohan. There was, moreover, but little abatement of the rigorous measures now in force against the Huguenots, and in the circumstances, therefore, de Rohan's proposal to return to France would be hazardous in the extreme. In the opinion of his friends the step would merely precipitate the impending sentence of excommunication, which would inevitably be followed by the confiscation of Les Rochers de Rohan to the Church.

"And so, ma mie, when you marry Gaston de Rohan you will be marrying a man crippled in body, crippled also in the fortune he had hoped to give you with his hand." Checking the quick protest that rose to the girl's lips, he went on still gravely. "It is but right that you should know all, Azerole, for, truly, it is on your account that the future looks somewhat dark to me. I did not know until lately how seriously my mother had burdened her estates in Piedmont through her munificent gifts to the church. And now there is Christophe to be thought of. Provision must be made for him. Not that I would grudge him aught, or even all, dear little man; but it is of thee I am thinking, sweetheart. I am remembering the cosy nest I had hoped to fit up for my nightingale

in Dauphiné among the beautiful old woods of Les Rochers de Rohan."

She interrupted him. "Nay then, Gaston, but is it possible you do not yet understand—?" There was a moment's hesitation, then, blushing pink, she went bravely on. "Know you not that for your nightingale the humblest of nests *with you* will be a home in which to sing for very joy of heart?"

He rewarded her for this speech after a fashion that deepened the pink to crimson in her cheeks. But, to do these lovers justice, they spent but little of their time together in the interchange of caresses, and soon they had drifted back again to graver talk.

"Azerole," said Gaston, abruptly breaking a little pause during which he had been studying her face, so changeful in its animation, yet so unchanging in its restfulness, "you are not the old Azerole." She looked up half startled. "Nay," he smiled, "I should say you are the same, yet different. Life's perplexities were wont to fret you. Do you remember how you were prone to say that you found it so difficult in the riddle of life to trust where you could not trace?"

"Ah, how childish, how presumptuous I was in those days!" she returned penitently. "Gaston, our Father God has been wondrous patient with me. It must, in very deed, have seemed to Him that His wayward scholar would never master even the alphabet of His lesson of TRUST. But there is one thing, methinks, that with King David of old I have learnt, that 'In the multitude of my thoughts within me, Thy comforts delight my soul.' But for the doubts and perplexities

that make life ofttimes seem a riddle, truly I should many and many a time have missed the rare sweetness of God's own comforts. But, ah, Gaston," she added humbly, "certes, I am yet but a backward learner!"

"Nay, then, sweetheart, methinks it is in the same school that the Divine Master has put us all, and it is the same lesson He would teach us all, only from different classrooms. My prison-cell at Pinerolo was in very truth a dreary cage for my impatient spirit, until it dawned upon me that my Father God had taken me aside into a schoolroom apart with Himself to learn the life-lesson I could not so well have mastered elsewhere. Thanks to the kind courtesy of de Coudre, who throughout treated me more like a guest than a prisoner, my personal possessions were most superficially overhauled, and during all these weary months I had a secret source of comfort in the Geneva Bible your people gave me at Wirtemberg. From its pages the Master taught me, Gaston de Rohan, that same lesson of TRUST. It came to me one day somewhat after this fashion—If God Almighty has entrusted to us who believe the key to that great mystery, 'God manifest in the Flesh,' the mystery which to the Jews is but a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness, while to us who are of the faith it is the power and wisdom of God, surely we may entrust to His keeping the key to the riddle of our little lives."

"That is good. That is good. I shall remember that, Gaston."

The mention of Pinerolo seemed to recall something else to de Rohan. "You know, ma mie, I saw a good deal of your people when I was invalided upon their hands in that little Wirtemberg village, and I could see that, while their position in a reformed German state is, without doubt, one of safety, it can but rarely be called one of social comfort or equality. One day last winter, when walking the ramparts of the citadel, I had a day-dream. In my vision I saw myself selling my estates in Languedoc in order to buy up land in Wirtemberg and found a settlement of ease and independence for your countrymen. It was part of my scheme to provide heads of families with grants of land at nominal rents, to live myself among them as feudal landlord and caretaker of their interests and—" here, with a little laugh, Gaston pulled himself up. "That was my dream, but, I fear me, it is likely to prove naught but a dream, or, if it be ever realised, the realisation must needs be in miniature."

Azerole was fain to clap her hands like the veriest child. "Oh, Gaston! Gaston! How wondrously beautiful would it be were such a dream, even in miniature, to come true! Only," here a sudden remembrance came to her, "there is Madame your mother."

"I have thought of that. I believe she would come with us to Germany. Moreover, it would be good for the estate here. Brianza in competent hands would soon free itself from burdens. It would be good also for Christophe. There is his education in a Protestant state to be considered. But hark! what is that?"

They both listened intently, and the sound Gaston

had heard was repeated—a long, clear whistle, coming from the direction of the château.

"Only Bersour can whistle like that," said de Rohan, springing to his feet. "Let us go back. It may be he is calling for us."

They hurried through the plantation, and, emerging into the open, were at once descried by Jules, who stood on the high terrace overlooking the park, across which the two were now rapidly making their way. He came quickly to meet them; and, as soon as she saw his face, Azerole, with sudden apprehension, exclaimed, "Is it Michel?"

The trooper bowed his head. "He is sinking fast, mademoiselle. Come; he asks for you."

In the avenue horses ready saddled stood waiting, and, mounting, the three rode off towards Malanot. Only once Azerole spoke. "Is there nothing that can be done, Jules?" He shook his head, and without another word they rode on, never drawing bridle until they reached the farm. Gaston lifted Azerole down from her horse, and hand in hand, followed by Bersour, they went up to the summer parlour where Michel lay on the couch by the open window. The farmer, Madame Justine, Léon—they were all there, but the eyes of the dying man, turning eagerly at the sound of coming footsteps, brightened at sight of the two who softly entered and came towards him.

Kneeling by the side of the sofa, Azerole took the thin hand in hers. "Dear Michel!" she murmured, her voice unsteady.

"Mademoiselle, it was kind of you—to come—to say adieu," he said, with pauses between the whispered words. "And—it *is* à-Dieu."

But this was too much for the girl. "Michel, Michel, you are not going to leave us? O Michel! you have given your life for ours!" Her voice ended in a choking sob.

A smile flickered on his lips, and a momentary strength came to him. "You say that too, mademoiselle?" he murmured, a ring of triumph in his tone. "Léon, he said the same. I asked him if it would help — even a very little—to atone for — for the past. He said it could not—but—" his voice failed, and, signing to Léon, he whispered, "Tell them."

"I told him there was no need," huskily obeyed Léon. "I told him the past had been fully atoned for by our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself the great and only Atonement for his past; ay, and for ours, as full of debts as his——"

Michel struggled to speak once more. "He frankly forgave—" were the only words they caught.

"But I told him," went on Léon, "that down here there was for Michel Roussier the love of grateful hearts, and up yonder the 'Well done!' of the Master."

There was a long silence, broken only by the weeping of Madame Justine. "Hyppolyte," she whispered, "are we sinning not to send for Father Matthieu?"

Michel looked up. "No need," he panted. "Wonderful! wonderful!" he murmured, looking full at Azerole,

his voice scarcely audible. "My Saviour Christ—frankly forgave—the debts all paid—mademoiselle, I am content."

Slowly his gaze wandered from one to the other of the group gathered round him; it rested lovingly for a moment on each sorrowful face, then, returning to Azerole, lingered in a last look of recognition. There was an instant's flutter of the failing breath, a quick sigh, and Michel Roussier, his debts all paid, was at peace.

"What is the matter?" asked a childish voice, breaking the solemn hush of the death-chamber. The group about the couch started, and turned to find it was little Christophe who stood at the open door, in one hand a lovely white rosebud, in the other his hat, which he had hurriedly taken off. Nearly every day of late the little fellow, when out for a ride, would come round by Malanot to ask for his sick friend, and it was seldom that he failed to bring a little offering in token of love and sympathy.

Something in the look of that little band of mourners, combined with the strange quiet of the room, awed and almost frightened the boy; but, when he glanced at the couch, his fears all vanished, and without a tremor he approached. Christophe had never seen death before; he did not recognise it now. That still pale face on the pillow, with its expression of settled peace, what a contrast to that other face, worn and suffering, which Christophe had grown sorrowfully accustomed to see during these past weeks! "What is the matter, poor

Michel?" had been the child's constant and pitying question, and ever the patient answer would come to cheer the anxious little inquirer. "There is naught the matter, Monsieur Christophe; naught but that I am tired, tired."

One long, loving look the boy took, a glad smile on his rosy lips; then, gently slipping the pure white bud within the wasted hand outside the coverlet, he held up a warning finger, for sobs were breaking again from poor Madame Justine. "Hush! hush!" he whispered, walking on tiptoe across the room to her. "We must not make a noise to wake Michel. I think our Father God Himself is resting him."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MARK OF THE RED ARROW

Monsieur l'Abbé Têtu was at work in the laboratory he had fitted up for himself in his sister's country house. He was often there, for in the quiet seclusion of the Château Claire he could prosecute his scientific and medical researches without let or hindrance.

The afternoon was late in September, and already the day, which had been dull and cloudy, was closing in, so that the abbé, in his eagerness to perfect an experiment over which he was very intent, had thrown open the shutters, a thing he rarely did when pursuing important investigations. Standing close to the window he held up between him and the light a small phial into which he poured with careful slowness an almost colourless liquid contained in the larger vessel he held in his other hand. On the table beside him lay the glass mask he had just been using, his mortar and pestle, a few empty bottles similar to the one he was filling, and various appliances connected with the apothecary's art. One other thing — a document written in cipher in a female hand—we must not omit to mention, seeing that it was the prescription Monsieur l'Abbé had been consulting during his labours of that afternoon. It was a private communication

which years ago he had received from Madame de Brinvilliers, the notorious poisoner, with whom Alphonse Têtu had been in the habit of corresponding—solely, of course, in the interests of the science of pharmacy—at a time when poisoning seemed to have become the rage in France.

The abbé, having filled first one and then a second bottle with his innocent-looking mixture, corked both securely, and supplying himself with small pieces of parchment, proceeded to label the phials. While for the moment he hesitated, the pen poised in his hand, his glance wandered to an open cupboard on whose shelves were neatly arranged the simple drugs and remedies Monsieur l'Abbé was wont to deal out with a free hand to the country-folk, by whom his wondrous skill as a leech was held in great repute. A row of bottles labelled "Sleeping Draught" caught his eye. "That will do," he muttered, dipping his pen in the ink. "One name is as good as another." He had finished his task when, a thought striking him, he took up his pen again, and dipping it this time in some red paint he had at hand, he faintly outlined in the corner of the labels the sign of an arrow, so small that it would almost have required a magnifying glass to make it distinguishable to the naked eye. Next he produced from a secret receptacle the key of a small double-doored cupboard at the other end of the room; but before locking up his freshly mixed "Sleeping Draughts" he decided to wait for a few minutes in order to make absolutely certain that no sediment could be detected at the bottom of the glass. While he waited he strode

up and down the laboratory, his thoughts keeping pace with his hurried steps.

"Certes, now that the country is quiet again, and travelling safe, it is in truth quite time that I should journey south and inquire after the welfare of my dear relatives in Piedmont. If rumour be true, and our most pious Majesty has it in his mind to confer signal honour upon monsieur our cousin on account of 'conspicuous gallantry in the field,' it is plain that even Madame de Maintenon's holy influence has failed for once. Vraiment, if the honour and glory of the army of France blinds the king to all else, we, who are under oath to maintain the honour and glory of the Church, dare not be blind to her interests. And I say this thing shall not be. Ma foi! but this renegade, this heretic, this apostate, shall not be exalted before a gaping France as the man of all men whom the king delights to honour. I swear this sacrilege shall not be! I, Alphonse Têtu, I will hinder it. If that fool Louvois had not been so confoundedly dilatory, the confiscation of Les Rochers de Rohan to the Church would have been an accomplished fact by now."

The abbé's face was flushed with mingled hate and anger, and so absorbed was he that, when he relaxed the spasmodic clenching of his hands, he dropped, without knowing that he did so, the key he had been holding in readiness. "Tiens! what saith the Church for the guidance of the faithful?—'He to whom the end is lawful, to him the means also are lawful'—that, methinks, is plain enough. Moreover, the pious Clement has clearly defined that same end—'Those

who err shall be altogether extirpated, and their goods, movable and immovable, may be seized by the faithful.' Nor, certes, is there any blame to be attached to any such who go forth in the name of Holy Church. It is his holiness Pope Urban who has laid down the maxim that 'We do not account them as murderers who, burning with zeal for their Catholic mother against excommunicate persons, have happened to slay some of them.' Voilà! Alphonse Têtu, thou faint of heart, what more wouldst thou have?"

Here the abbé's religious reflections were broken in upon by a knock at the door. The unexpectedness of the interruption—he had given strict orders that he was not to be disturbed—took the abbé off his guard, and he started violently. The next instant he was himself again. "Begone, knave!" he called out, with more even than his customary harshness in speaking to a servant, for Alphonse had been wont to pride himself upon an invulnerable strength of nerve, and his momentary weakness had annoyed him. "Have I not said I will not be disturbed?"

"It is I, Alphonse," returned a thin, sharp voice from behind the locked door. "There has come one who brings a message of importance." The speaker was Mademoiselle Claire Têtu.

"Peste!" impatiently ejaculated her brother, and he did not open the door, for even his sister was but seldom allowed to invade the privacy of the laboratory. "Tell him he must needs come again."

"Brother, it is a special courier from Versailles, and his errand demands haste."

A sudden change came over the abbé's face. "At last!" he ejaculated, rubbing his hands together. "Ha! ha! it may be our sleeping draughts can be dispensed with after all!"

He turned sharply, and his eye fell on the bottles. With preoccupied haste he felt for the key, but, failing to find it, thrust the phials into the open cupboard beside their comrade draughts, then drew back the bolts and lock of the laboratory door, and in another minute, forgetful of all else, was on his way to the court of the château, where the royal messenger was awaiting him. More deliberately, after securing the key of her brother's private room, mademoiselle followed him downstairs. As she had expected, she found him in her sitting-room, standing at the window to catch the last rays of light by which to read the despatch. She waited in silence. Suddenly a low but deep imprecation burst from his lips, the paper fell from his hands to the floor, and, glancing at her brother in consternation, Mademoiselle Têtu saw that his face was livid. She laid her hand on his arm. "What is it, Alphonse?"

Fiercely he shook her off. "Read for yourself," he muttered through his clenched teeth; and, like one possessed, he began to stride up and down the floor with wild, unsteady steps.

Raising the despatch Claire rapidly ran her eye over it, and saw at a glance that it was not the long-hoped-for deed of confiscation of the de Rohan estates in Dauphiné, but a document partly official, partly informal, from the French Minister of Finance. The first part of the document contained a courteous announce-

ment that Monsieur l'Abbé Têtu was expected to preach in the Chapel Royal at Versailles on Sunday, the next day but one. The letter went on to say:—

"By the way, Monsieur l'Abbé, it is as well the matter relating to the confiscation of Les Rochers de Rohan had not been pressed too far. In General Bouffler's report of the campaign of last year it is recorded that, but for the brilliant sally of monsieur the Captain Gaston de Rohan at the siege of Frakenthal, the town would have been lost to France. His Majesty is so mightily pleased with the gallantry of this young officer, who it appears is disabled through his heroic exploits for king and country, that even the bold Bossuet himself dares not remind his Majesty of that little heresy scandal so long pending further inquiry. Thanks to that court buffoon, de Brissac, the escapade of the Bonhomme has been turned into a mere Don Quixote joke for the amusement of the ladies of the court.

"On another account also we may thank our stars that the confiscation was not precipitated. It appears that Madame, la belle Héloise, has another son besides our gallant captain, one Christophe de Beaurégard, a minor. Some foolish woman's fancy kept her from owning the child as hers until now, when the story has leaked out, none knows how. The king has been highly entertained with the romance. It is now all the talk of Paris. What a precious complication the claims of this second son and heir would have made in your little scheme of confiscation, mon ami!"

Mademoiselle Claire, in her turn letting the paper

drop to the floor, faced her brother. "This boy—this Christophe de Beaurégard—is it true?"

Mademoiselle Têtu had often seen her brother in a passion, but the face he now turned upon her, distorted with fury almost beyond recognition as the face of a human being, half terrified her. "True? Yes, it is true. I see it all now. And she has fooled me, that accursed woman. Now I know why something in that cripple's face was wont to affect me disagreeably. He was becoming the living image of his father Bayard de Rohan. Now I know why it was that she, Madame his mother, feared me—she dreaded my discovering *that* secret. Why did I not? Fool, fool, that I was!" Then, as his sister still continued to stare bewildered, he hissed out, "Idiot that you are! Do you not understand? It was her vow. She planned to evade it by denying the child to be hers. But," his face changed again, the wave of passion swept out of it, his thin lips were drawn in over his teeth, "but she shall not escape. The vow shall yet be fulfilled, ay, if I have to go to Rome to get a mandate from the Holy Father himself to enforce it." Again he began to pace the floor, but in another minute, the presence even of his sister irritating him beyond endurance, he turned upon her fiercely and bade her begone.

She was used to such outbreaks, and she went at once. Soon enough he would be cool and send for her again. He generally needed her help in his schemes. But the hours passed on, and still he remained shut up alone. She could hear his hurried steps pacing monotonously up and down. The hour for supper arrived and

she sent to summon him. His only reply was a burst of invectives hurled at the head of the servant who had knocked at the boudoir door. Mademoiselle Têtu supped alone and sparingly. When she had finished, she went to her sitting-room, entered without knocking, and placed upon the table a plate of meat and a bottle of wine.

"What in the name of thunder did you bring that abominable stuff here for, Claire? Are you idiotic enough to suppose that it is food I want?" he snarled.

"It *is* food you want, and I am not an idiot for knowing that," she replied, a touch of asperity in her voice. "And it is you who will be an idiot, Alphonse, if you elect to starve. You know full well that, if you do not calm yourself and eat and drink, you will be unfit for your work the day after to-morrow."

"So much the better," he snapped. "His Majesty has not been so liberal in his favours to me of late that, at his beck and call, I should put myself to the inconvenience of preaching in the Chapel Royal. Send word that I am ill."

A peculiar smile curled the thin lips of Mademoiselle Claire. "Louvois will be delighted. His nephew, the Bishop of Lyons, will be only too pleased to step into your place, and delight the courtiers with his obsequious eloquence. He has done so successfully, you will remember, on more than one occasion of late."

The abbé winced. "He shall not get the chance this time. I shall go myself," he thundered, the red flush deepening on his face.

"Then you must eat, brother, if you would not have

the king tell you at the end of your discourse that you have bored him for the last time," and she pushed a chair to the table, and signed to him to sit down. Then, like a wise woman that she was, she left the room. An hour later she returned. A portion of the meat had been eaten, the wine bottle was empty. The ecclesiastic sat lost in thought, his elbows on the table, his head buried in his hands.

"Alphonse," his sister's tone was sharp, "go to bed. I have seen to everything for the start. In six hours you must be in the saddle. If you do not get sleep you will not be fit to ride."

With the sullen obedience of a man who has been goaded beyond his powers of resistance the abbé obeyed. But in passing to his room his voice was heard calling peremptorily for more wine. Claire Têtu frowned. Her brother was at all times a deep drinker, but this certainly was not the time to risk indulging to excess. Dare she thwart him further? While she debated the matter the minutes passed and the wine had been brought. "At the least I will see that he has no more," she soliloquised, then sat down to listen and to wait. Presently she heard the sound of heavy steps pacing up and down the room overhead. The lines deepened on her brow. Still the restless unequal tread went on. Unable at length to bear it any longer, she went noiselessly upstairs, and entered her brother's room, which he had forgotten to lock.

"Alphonse, shall I send off a courier to Monsieur the Bishop of Lyons praying him to take your place on Sunday?"

"Imbécile!" he shouted in a fury. "It would be more to the purpose if, instead of adding one more to them with your infernal clatter, you would stop these confounded noises in my head—these voices eternally hissing at me. 'Fool! fool!' they say; 'befooled by a woman!' I tell you they are driving me mad."

"The wine has gone to his head already," she muttered. Acting upon a bright thought she left the room. The key of the laboratory was in her pocket luckily, and she knew where her brother kept the simple remedies she as well as he was accustomed to administer to the poor of the villages round. In five minutes she had returned, bringing with her a small bottle marked "Sleeping Draught." In a fit of moody petulance the abbé had thrown himself on the bed, his face turned to the wall. Mademoiselle Claire poured the draught into a glass, to which she added wine, and carried it to her brother. "Drink this, Alphonse. Doubtless it will silence these voices and send you to sleep."

Claire Têtu was endowed with a power of will equal to that of her brother, and on this occasion her nerves and temper were calmer than his. There were times like the present, when, having worn himself out mentally and physically, he would yield to her as to a stronger force.

She replaced the empty glass upon the table and went to the window to close the *persiennes*. "Now you will sleep. It was fortunate I found the sleeping draught ready at hand in the cupboard. I knew——"

Her sentence ended in a sharp cry of pain. She turned to find it was her brother who was clutching her

by the arm. At the first taste of the wine, which he had swallowed at a gulp, a sudden terror had come to him, and she had hardly uttered the words "sleeping draught," when he had sprung from the bed, and, grasping her arm as in a vice, shook her, glaring at her the while with a look in his terrified eyes that made her recoil.

"Where did you get the draught, woman?" he screamed, shaking her again. "Where is the bottle?"

Sickening, for a suspicion of the truth began vaguely to dawn upon her, she pointed silently to the phial she had left beside the wine. Snatching it up he held it close to the lamp. His hand was shaking like a leaf, but his sight, preternaturally keen, detected with only too terrible distinctness the mark of the red arrow upon the label.

The glass bottle dropped from his hand. He threw up his arms, then let them fall heavily by his side. The fatal arrow had gone straight to the mark, and his face, which had grown ashy pale, worked convulsively.

"Mon Dieu!" he muttered hoarsely. "Mon Dieu! It is the poison!"

For one, two, three seconds perhaps, Claire Têtu's mental faculties were paralysed. Then she came to herself. In her turn she grasped him by the arm. "The antidote?" she whispered, then bit her lips till they bled to keep herself from succumbing to the faintness which threatened her.

The abbé's face, which was twitching horribly, looked green in the lamplight. His stiffening lips moved, but the muttered words were not an answer to her question.

"Two hours from now! Two hours!" was what she distinguished at last.

In her frenzy she again shook him violently. "Alphonse, Alphonse, is there an antidote?—who knows it? Speak! Say!"

Once more, but with an effort, his lips moved. "Hubert—Hubert—the lay-brother, he knows—" his voice was thick, and, reeling, he slipped heavily to the floor.

One look she gave, then fled from the room, down the stairs and to the stables, counting as she went. "'Two hours from now'—only 'two hours,' he said. And it will take a man a full hour and a half, galloping all the way, to ride to the Abbey and back! Was it only 'two hours' he said? 'Two hours!'" The words were burning themselves into her brain. She would go on saying them until—until—until what?—until when?

CHAPTER XXVIII

LED FORTH BY THE RIGHT WAY

The news of the sudden death, from apoplexy as was supposed, of Alphonse l'Abbé Têtu was carried to Castel Brianza by the courier who brought from France a summons to Captain Gaston de Rohan to set out for Versailles, to receive from his Majesty in person a colonel's commission and a high order of merit, in recognition of the signal services rendered by the said captain during the campaign of 1688.

The great enemy of the house of de Rohan dead!—Gaston reinstated in his sovereign's favour!—the tidings were almost stunning in their effect. Indeed, it was only by slow degrees that those most immediately concerned grasped the situation, and realised the momentous change in their lives which, by the good hand of their God upon them, had been so unexpectedly, so startlingly brought about.

In the afternoon of the day on which the royal messenger arrived at the château a grave conference was held there between Henri Arnaud, Pastor Montoux, Léon, and Gaston de Rohan. A communication of a serious nature, affecting as it did the prospects of the French Reformed in the Valleys, had reached Arnaud

some days previously from Turin, and he, along with François Montoux, had ridden over to Castel Brianza to talk the matter over with their friends at the château. The information the Vaudois leader had received was to the effect that Duke Amadeus, yielding to the pressure of political considerations, was contemplating the signing of a treaty which would necessitate his issuing an order of banishment to all French refugees in the Piedmontese Valleys. This edict of expulsion, if carried into effect,[1] which there was only too good reason to suppose it would be, would expel at least seven pastors, originally natives of Pragela and Dauphiné, two of whom were Henri Arnaud and his colleague François Montoux. The order of banishment would affect no fewer than three thousand Frenchmen now residing in the Valleys, and the future of this vast congregation of homeless fellow-countrymen was an anxious question to their pastors. But already Arnaud's active brain was revolving plans for the well-being of his much-tried people. The scheme which most commended itself to him was that he, as representative from his countrymen, should apply to one of the Protestant princes of Germany—say the good Duke of Wirtemberg—for permission to establish a Vaudois colony in his dominions.

"I am of opinion, said Arnaud, "that the duke will at once accede to our petition. But we need not look for it that to a penniless band of foreign emigrants the

[1] In point of fact, this edict was not promulgated until a few years later.

German prince will allot a land of Goshen. Without capital, strange to the ways and language of the country, our road to independence and prosperity must necessarily be toilsome and uphill." Arnaud's colleague glanced at him anxiously. Almost for the first time in his experience François Montoux could detect in the clarion voice of the hero of Salabertrand and the Balsille a note of despondency.

Here Gaston, who had been gazing abstractedly from the window, came forward. "I believe, Monsieur General, that I am now in a position to relieve you in some measure from the burden of this new responsibility. Only yesternight I heard from Sig. Bocelli, my agent now in Paris, of the sale at an almost fabulously high price of an estate of mine in Languedoc. It gives me sincere pleasure to inform you that, in accordance with a long-cherished desire of mine, I shall as speedily as may be hand over to you in a deed of gift the purchase-money in full, that with it you may buy land in the German Protestant States for your fellow exiles. Furthermore, Monsieur Pastor, be it known unto you that it is my intention humbly to offer the services of Gaston de Rohan as commissioner of the new colony in Wirtemberg. Happily, nay providentially, for me, this weak arm will enable me to procure my discharge from the army without incurring the king's displeasure."

And now it was the turn of the two pastors to find that day's good news bewildering. Even Henri Arnaud

remained silent from sheer surprise. But when de Rohan went on to unfold in detail the scheme he had formed in the solitude of his cell at Pinerolo, Arnaud's amazement changed to thankful gratitude. "Now, praise be to our God!" he exclaimed. "Praise Him, ay, certes, and that not only for His wonderful works to the children of my people, but for His long-suffering patience towards Henri Arnaud—him of little faith! Shame on me for my faithless fears! My brothers, let us give thanks to our faithful God." Standing with bowed head, the others reverently following his example, Arnaud poured out from his full heart a burst of thanks to Him who had thus wondrously provided for His people so unexpectedly threatened again with tribulation.

At the conclusion of the prayer M. Montoux laid his hand on Gaston's shoulder, and put the very question which had been asked by Azerole but a few weeks before. "My dear fellow, what of Madame your mother?"

"I have spoken with her, Monsieur Pastor. She is willing, nay glad, to go forth with the Lord's exiled people to the land chosen for their inheritance."

Whereupon there followed a long and animated debate over the Wirtemberg scheme, whose proportions grew larger and its prospects brighter the closer it was looked at. So engrossing was the subject that it was some time before even M. Montoux was struck by something unusual in Léon's look and manner, and by the fact that, interested though he was in the Vaudois

colony, the interest appeared to be for the sake of others rather than his own.

"My son, surely you go with us?" demanded his father, with an abruptness caused by sudden anxiety.

"I think not, father." The quiet but decided announcement was received with exclamations of consternation from the others, but Léon went on unmoved. "In my time of need Monsieur and Madame Broussel were as father and mother to me—a heretic stranger. Now that they are feeble and lonely, it would be ill done in me, methinks, to forsake them." Unable to speak, Pastor Montoux grasped his son's hand, and wrung it hard. "It may not be for long that they will have need of me; and whenever my work here is done, and if it so please God to permit me, I shall come and assist you, my father, in the shepherding of the flock over which God has been pleased to place you, and thus the ambition of my life will be attained."

"My Léon, you have made my heart to rejoice," said the pastor in a choked voice. "And if Monsieur and Madame Broussel's gain be our loss—your mother's and mine—what shall we say but that the good will of the Lord be done?"

"Yesternight I said somewhat to the farmer and Madame Justine about my remaining with them, and, methinks, as the time draws near when—when—you, my friends, must needs depart, I shall have somewhat wherewith to comfort myself in the remembrance of the tearful joy of the old folks at Malanot. Moreover, I

shall have the comradeship of our faithful Jules, who has decreed to remain on the farm so long as I am pleased to do the like; thus God has thought for me, my father." The young fellow spoke bravely, despite the suspicious huskiness in his voice.

It was now Gaston's turn to grasp his hand. "Léon, you noble fellow! This is altogether like you, and only what we might have looked for. But you need not think you will be forsaken, mon ami. Let us all take cheer. There will be many journeyings between Piedmont and Wirtemberg. I must needs come often to see after affairs at Brianza, and I make no doubt there will be those from the homes at Wirtemberg who will petition in turn for the pleasure of accompanying me. And hearken, brother Léon, in the Schloss Brianza, in the new country, there will be a guest-chamber set apart and sacred as 'Our Léon's room.'"

The two young men again grasped hands. Léon was much moved, but not altogether sorrowfully. "It is well," he said, looking from one to the other with honest affection. "It is well."

Arnaud, who had been silently nodding his approval of the foregoing conversation, now claimed Gaston's attention for a moment. "I would gladly stand here until midnight, messieurs, discussing topics that touch us all so nearly, but my presence is needed at Torre Pelice. Ere I depart, Monsieur de Rohan, I would fain attempt to thank you in the name of my people for your proposed generosity. But, as I told you

once before, I am a man of deeds rather than words. Would that I could express in action my sense of gratitude to you!"

De Rohan smiled. "It may be that I shall take you at your word, Monsieur Arnaud. There is a favour I shall have to ask you to do for me, and that speedily perchance." And he drew the pastor aside into a curtained recess, where they held a brief but apparently satisfactory colloquy together.

Shortly afterwards the two pastors and Léon left the château together; and Gaston betook himself to the boudoir in search of his mother. He found her sitting alone by the fire, her hands clasped in her lap, her whole attitude that of restfulness. "Still dreaming of Schloss Brianza, madre mia?" he demanded, lightly touching her forehead with his lips. She turned her face up to him and smiled. "Comment, Madame! but I vow you grow younger and handsomer each day!" he gaily declared, looking at her with fond pride.

Madame de Rohan shook her head at his wild words, little dreaming how near the truth they were. For she had entered upon a new life, this lonely, heavily-laden woman, a life abounding in the joy and peace of believing in her Saviour; and now an expression, brighter than in the happy days of her youth, had given her a beauty above that of earth. Pardon and consolation for the past, rest in the present, happiness assured for the future — were these blessings not

enough to account for the change in her that was so evident to all?

Sitting down beside her de Rohan unfolded Sig. Bocelli's letter. There was a paragraph in it which he had reserved for his mother's eyes alone, and he watched her now while she read it:—

"Paris calls you a lucky dog, mon ami"—so ran the letter—"for the king, to crown his other marks of favour, has announced his gracious intention to bestow upon you the hand of la belle Mademoiselle de Mondovi, thereby making you the envy of every gallant in the court. Ecco! it is well that your affections are as yet unentangled! For I make no doubt you are well aware that in these delicate *affaires d'amour* for a courtier to say 'Nay' to Louis le Grand's 'Yea' would mean disaster, if not ruin."

With an exclamation of consternation Madame Héloise laid down the letter. "Therein Sig. Bocelli speaks but the truth," she said in a troubled voice.

"I know it," he quietly replied.

There was a moment or two of silence. "One way there is out of the difficulty," she went on hesitatingly.

"I know that also, my mother."

Another pause. "When must you start for Paris, Gaston?"

De Rohan considered. "This is Tuesday. The day after to-morrow at latest, if I would reach Versailles on the date fixed by his Majesty." So saying he sprang

to his feet, and walked quickly to the door, his own words seeming to have suddenly awakened him to a realisation of the need there was of haste. "Where is she?"

"In the library seeking for a book she knew I was in quest of. Gaston—" her tone was wistful, and he turned at once. "Gaston, you will be very tender with her? Methinks, if ever there was a time in her life when she must needs miss her mother, that time is now."

He nodded and was gone. Madame de Rohan, her hands in her lap, but the fingers more tightly interlaced than before, sat motionless in the firelight. She had not long to wait. Within half-an-hour he came, but this time he was not alone. Azerole, flushed and shy, her lips unsteady, walked by his side, her hand held in his tender clasp. He led her up to his mother. "Madre mia, it is well," he said softly. "When I go to Versailles, Azerole, the grand-niece of the king's old friend, the Baron de Montélimart, will accompany me as my wedded wife, and it so please God."

Madame held out her arms, and the girl sprang towards her. "Ah, how good to me is our Father God!" she murmured, hiding her face, for now the tears were coming. "How kind, for have not I you, dear Madame, to mother me when most I have need?"

It was noon on Thursday, Gaston de Rohan and

Azerole Montoux's wedding-day. The Castel Brianza chapel, a long disused building, had been hastily fitted up for the occasion. Branches of autumn-tinted leaves hid the stained walls, garlands of evergreens were twined round the time-worn pillars, wreaths of flowers festooned the place with a luxuriance that would have bespoken lavish waste anywhere but in the sunny south. A richly-embroidered curtain had been drawn across the chancel, and in front of the curtain was a small table on which Léon had placed a Bible, the same precious book which had for so long been hidden in the haunted cave in the Bois Suaire.

Grouped about the door of the building were a goodly number of servants and villagers. If orthodoxy forbade them to venture further, interest and affection would not allow them to remain at a greater distance. Within the chapel were to be found the bolder spirits led by Blaise and Jacqueline, whose religious scruples were allayed by the sage reflection that the venerable Prior Baronius and gentle Father Matthieu had ever a kind word to say for the Vaudois, and by the further comforting consideration that where their Madame could go, surely her dependants were safe to follow.

In gown and bands, his hand resting on the open Bible, waited Pastor Henri Arnaud, and with him stood Gaston de Rohan, looking very handsome in his captain's uniform. Beside his brother stood the groomsman, a tiny figure in myrtle green slashed with silver.

Oppressed with a sense of his responsibilities as a functionary of importance in this mysterious religious ceremony, Christophe had a vague idea that his office required of him to keep his eyes with unwavering fixity upon the bridegroom, at least until the bride arrived to relieve him of that duty. But it was an inexpressible relief to him to know that not only was Léon close at hand ready to support him if occasion required, but that his mother also was near by. Madame de Rohan, erect and stately, her whole demeanour expressive of a calm gladness, looked, as Jacqueline proudly whispered to her underlings, "a very queen" in her robe of black velvet. Good M. Broussel and his Justine, attired in their simple best, glanced furtively and with something akin to awe towards the regal figure that in this very gown no doubt had once graced the court of "le Grand Monarque" at Versailles. In the background, among the shadows of the pillars, loomed the giant form of Jules Bersour, who stood twirling his moustache with the fierce energy that with him always betokened the working of strong excitement.

But now a little movement about the entrance to the chapel drew the attention of all to the door by which the bride was entering leaning on her father's arm. Azerole's dress was of fine white lawn, enriched at neck and sleeves by flutings of exquisite lace, the same which had adorned the robe worn by Héloise de Castelane on her wedding-morn long years ago.

Jacqueline and the two maids, who had sat up nearly all the night to finish their beloved mademoiselle's gown, exchanged glances of supreme satisfaction as they surveyed the effect of their handiwork. Fair, sweet, graceful, with a modest shyness that but added to her charm, the girl advanced up the chapel aisle and took her place by Gaston's side. She was a trifle pale, and her eyes, after one swift upward glance into her bridegroom's face, were cast down, but he at least had caught the look of love and joy which had been flashed to him, and he mutely answered it by the firm pressure of the hand he took in his.

"Ah, Madame Jacqueline, but is she not in very truth 'La Belle des Valleys'?" murmured the grave-faced Vaudoise maiden, who, to her intense delight, had been chosen to accompany the young bride to France in the capacity of lady's-maid. Mariette, who had known and loved Mademoiselle Azerole in the old Ponefrà days, already regarded her mistress with a proud sense of proprietorship.

The simple but impressive ceremony over, the party adjourned to the château, where refreshments on a liberal scale had been provided, and thither throughout the afternoon visitors flocked to pay their greetings to the newly-wedded pair. Humble friends, whose hearts had been won by many acts of kindness shown them in their hour of need by Mademoiselle Montoux, eagerly elbowed their way among others of higher station, who had long since found out that the heretic

barbette possessed a subtle charm of bright unselfishness that was wondrously fascinating. By twos and threes they came, one and all expressing personal regret in bidding farewell to Madame Gaston de Rohan. For it was now known that after visiting the great court at Versailles, Captain de Rohan would take his bride to her mother in Wirtemberg, where Madame Héloise and her son Christophe were to join them in the spring.

. . . . . .

It was five o'clock in the afternoon. The guests, all save M. Broussel, his wife, and Pastor Arnaud, had gone; the "Traveller's Psalm" had been sung, and Azerole, having exchanged her white dress for a riding skirt, was returning from the servants' hall, where she had been bidding affectionate adieux to her faithful friends of the household, when in the dim light of a corridor she felt her arm grasped by a tiny hand.

"Azerole, I saw Jules leading up and down your beautiful new horse in the court, and—and—a great lump has suddenly grown up in the middle of my throat. When will it go away?"

In the circumstances Azerole dared not offer a kiss, so she made answer cheerily, "It will go away with me, Monsieur de Beaurégard de Rohan." He heaved a sigh of relief, but waited for proof of her assurance. "When Gaston and I are both gone, then you will be able to smile again. You will find out that Madame your mother's heart cannot after all become over-sad, and

that because she remembers she has still a son left to comfort her, our little-man-Christophe, the boy with the grown man's heart."

"I see," he returned, satisfied. "Voilà! if we must needs kiss one another, sister Azerole, it had best be now, while the lump is choking me at any rate, and there is no one by."

But it was in saying farewell to Léon that Azerole's heart-strings felt strained almost to breaking. The brother and sister had drawn aside within the shadow of a window-recess, and with her arms about his neck she broke down, and the first tears she had shed that day fell in a sudden shower. "Léon! Léon! I know not how to leave thee! Throughout these long years of our exile God gave us to each other, and I had never once thought that there would come a day when I would be parted from thee. What shall I do?"

He passed his hand tenderly over the bowed head. "The months will soon pass, and the spring will be here, chérie, and then, as thou knowest, I am coming to Wirtemberg with the rest to see our precious mother and little Stella, and all the dear home party at the Schloss Brianza. God knows," he went on, but more slowly, warned by a certain unsteadiness in his voice, "God knows how I shall miss thee, my Azerole, my help and comfort! At the first I confess I was like to be rebellious, and was fain to cry out 'Why?' For to my poor vision it seemed a mystery how it could be the best way—at least for me—that you and I,

little sister, should be sundered. Soon, however, there sounded in my ears the words, 'He led them forth by the right way,' and certes, I told myself there could be for me, Léon Montoux, no other way *but* His. Next, I minded me of these bygone years, and the pains our Father God has taken to teach us that there is no cause for us to fret over the riddle, when we know it is His hand that holds the key."

Azerole lifted up her head, smiling through her tears. "And methinks that even this perverse Azerole has learnt that, when we know it is Divine Love that has turned the key, it would ill become the hand of faith to try and force the lock."

THE END